

AMBROSE BIERCE

and the Black Hills

BY PAUL FATOUT

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To my father, Daniel, 1855–1927
and my mother, Margaret, 1860–1952



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PAUL FATOUT

Lafayette, Indiana
February 10, 1955



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Ambrose Bierce and the Black Hills

Prologue

AMBROSE BIERCE, farm boy, soldier, and newspaperman, was born in Ohio and grew up in Indiana. But when he went across the country to San Francisco with General Hazen's expedition in 1866, residence in California for over thirty years thereafter made him more western than eastern. Like the forty-niners who lost their identity as New Englanders and Pennsylvanians back in the "states," Bierce was neither Buckeye nor Hoosier. It is not surprising that California unrest and periodic stampedes induced him to interrupt his newspaper career for a fling at gold mining, a western phenomenon however many easterners got into it. The very air blowing in from far over the mountains of the Pacific slope seemed laden with gold dust. Breathing that for a while made people push off with a glint in the eye and a pick in the hand. Bierce followed the crowd. He might less readily have taken off for the mines had he been editor, say, of the Winesburg, Ohio, *Eagle*.

Not that he stampeded or plodded into the hills with a burro carrying pick, pan, shovel, and grub. He inched into mining gradually, not as full-bearded, blue-shirted prospector, but as an executive of a sort. After preliminary sorties into the business, he spent some months of 1880 in the Black Hills as an employee of the Black Hills Placer

Mining Company, which operated among the gravel bars of Rockerville.

Attended by high hopes of success, this venture nevertheless brought Bierce nothing but disappointment and frustration. It rewarded him neither with gold nor with satisfaction, but only with that dubious asset, disillusioning experience. Probably for these reasons the mining episode has been hitherto an obscure interval in his life, unilluminated by himself or others. Enjoying failure no more than any other man, he did not talk or write about the Black Hills debacle. Yet he could have been gratified by the role he played. Even a good man may be defeated, and Bierce in the Hills was a good man—not the opinionated cynic, satirist, and wit of his newspaper columns, but a serious-minded man, skillful in business affairs, earnest, and devoted to a company that did not deserve his loyalty. The portrait is new and admirable. Whatever the damage to his ego at the time, he merits now the posthumous reward of high praise for character and effort.

He had had an eye on the Hills for several years before he reached them, commenting in his journalism on the news from there, and once drawing a gold mining map for Bancroft and Company. From a distance he watched developments in this most recent gold field, a new, youthful region still half-wild and not yet free of hostile red men. If not a pioneer in fact, Bierce came close to being one in fancy, as it were. This remote keeping in touch makes pertinent a few fragments of Hills history and brief notes about Hills country and people, some of whom Bierce was to know, to admire, and to excoriate.

1. *Black Hills Pilgrims*

ON AUGUST 2, 1874, H. N. Ross and W. T. McKay, miners accompanying the Black Hills reconnaissance of General George Custer, panned gold from the gravel of French Creek on the Sioux Reservation. From an eight-foot shaft that did not reach bedrock, takings of from five to twenty cents a pan induced the first stages of that disease commonly known in America as "gold fever." Glowing dispatches from the Custer expedition aggravated the disease: "Using the amount of fine gold collected from one pan of earth as a basis of calculation, and making a liberal allowance for exaggeration, the most valuable diggings found, in Custer's Gulch, will yield \$20 a day per man, worked with a pan; the ordinary method of sluice mining would give a return of over \$100 a day, while the results of a systematic course of hydraulic mining would be something enormous."¹ This sort of news at once convinced the restless, the footloose, the jobless, and the gold-hungry. Skeptical travelers questioned such generous estimates, but these doubters could not dispel the popular vision of hill-sides strewn with nuggets.

¹ Dispatch from Bismarck, Dakota, August 31, 1874. *New York Times*, September 7, 1874.

The mirage of ready riches made old hands in played-out western camps turn eyes and feet toward the Hills. On the Eastern seaboard and in the Middle West, the news barely found room among interminable columns of juicy revelations in the Beecher-Tilton scandal. Nevertheless, bank clerks, merchants, and counterjumpers, beset by hard times, caught the fever and dreamed of wealth. Within four months, mining parties had penetrated the Sioux Reservation, fortified themselves against Indian attack, and dug in for the winter.

Alert to omens of an impending rush, the United States government sternly forbade Black Hills prospecting as a violation of the Sioux treaty of 1868, which reserved to the Indians all of the present state of South Dakota west of the Missouri River. Generals Sherman and Sheridan announced the use of troops—the entire army if necessary—to prevent entry and to eject invaders. This exemplary righteousness was noble but unavailing. Some miners did leave voluntarily, and others, after dodging troopers for a time, were rounded up and escorted off the premises. Then, when released outside the Reservation, they promptly sneaked back in again. Miners and military played a lively game of hide-and-seek. As one persistent player said: “I have been captured and sent out from the Hills four times . . . I give the troops more trouble in catching me each time, and I guess I can stand it as long as they can.”² No vigilance deterred prospectors, and no high-minded principle allayed gold fever in the spring of 1875.

Enterprising Sioux City businessmen organized the Black Hills Transportation Company in the expectation of a thriving freightage of men and merchandisc. Bismarck, Sidney, and Fort Pierre angled for business by extolling the

² Richard Irving Dodge, *The Black Hills*, 111.

merits of their respective routes to the diggings and by capitalizing on every real or imaginary strike. Any footsore miner drifting into town with a sack of dust was good for an inflated news story. In Cheyenne, a popular jumping-off point, gold seekers almost doubled the population in a few weeks. Grizzled forty-niners, veterans of Virginia City and Helena, prospectors who had been stranded at Silver City or had struck it rich at Miner's Delight rubbed elbows with downy tenderfeet who poured in by train from the East. They could put up at the Black Hills Hotel, outfit at the Black Hills Outfitting Depot, and get drunk at the Black Hills Saloon. Western papers printed convenient schedules of supplies for parties of four, six, and eight: yokes of oxen, sacks of flour, bushels of beans, and pounds of bacon needed to take them in and, if they retained their scalps, to bring them out.

All points of departure seethed with restless and perplexed adventurers. On the one hand, as a reporter put it, "the Scylla of maddened Indians, and Government troops instructed to stop them"; on the other, with ruinously high prices rapidly taking their ready cash, "the Charybdis of starvation to haunt them." Still, the decision to brave the unknown won about as often as not. The *New York Times* observed: "A gentleman who has just returned from the far West says that it is impossible to imagine the excitement in the frontier towns and villages concerning the Black Hills. Everywhere parties are organizing, and are only waiting for the opening of Spring to start for the supposed Eldorado."³

This turmoil served notice that a mere treaty could not dam the surge of white American civilization, or at least of white American acquisitiveness. Agitation was so rabid that

³ April 19, 1875.

the *New York Times*, recalling the fruitless Pikes Peak stampede, dourly remarked: "If gold were reported found in the mountains of the moon, that planet would become a more desirable place for emigration than the fairest agricultural land on this globe."⁴ Editors berated the government for permitting such a minor hindrance as a treaty to delay gathering the golden harvest. A United States Senator argued for abrogation on the Senate floor. Typical of prevailing opinion was the realistic western view:

That portion of Dakota occupied by the various bands of Sioux belongs not to them, but to the representatives of an advancing civilization. The romance of the Indian right to hereditary possession of all or portion of the domain over which the United States now claims jurisdiction is the veriest bosh. A power beyond that which takes to itself the right to make and unmake treaties between men long ago decreed that the American continent should be given over to the progress of enlightenment and the temporal advancement of those who are willing to make use of God's best gifts while they are on earth.⁵

Such insistence, invoking God and progress, forced the government to negotiate for the Hills territory. In May, 1875, Sioux delegations led by Lone Horn, Spotted Tail, and Red Cloud went to Washington to confer with the Great White Father.

Splendidly barbaric in paint, ornamental feathers, bead-work moccasins, and colored blankets, they titillated Victorian ladies in the Palmer House at Chicago and excited rapt attention in the capital. Carrying decorated tomahawks and long pipes—one delegate carrying his pipe at shoulder

⁴ March 20, 1875.

⁵ Yankton, Dakota Territory, *Daily Press and Dakotian*, June 5, 1875.

arms with a "Grant and Wilson" campaign flag in the stem—they met President Grant, who received them affably. "I want to do that which will do you good," said he, "and make you contented and happy . . . We know what is for your good better than you can know yourselves," and after a few more paternal remarks passed them along to his two great chiefs, the Secretary of the Interior and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

The fatherly head-patting of Washington bureaucrats appeared to be a prelude to the customary swindle. But the Sioux were wily. After two weeks of palaver, many orations by reds and whites—interpreters deleting the franker insults—and many "How's!" the Indians refused to cede the Black Hills. Their only concession was, for a consideration, to give up hunting privileges between the Niobrara and North Platte rivers in Nebraska. On the Hills business, they conceded nothing, arguing that this matter must be put up to their people.

For months tribesmen around Dakota campfires discussed and harangued. Farseeing Sioux leaders knew very well that they had not the remotest chance of staving off the determined white invasion. Their only course was to agitate for a high price, including livestock, farm implements, sawmills, houses, schools, and civilized furniture. The rumor was soon current that the Indians also intended to ask for a cash indemnity of \$50,000,000. One chief, named Young-Man-Afraid-of-His-Horses, put in a bid for one hundred horses. But for over a year the tribes and the government commissioners reached no agreement.

Although negotiations were hanging fire, the government relaxed immigration restrictions in the fall of 1875, and by late winter thousands of prospectors had staked claims. One of them wrote back: "There arn't no discount

about the gold in this country; it is much better than has been represented.”⁶ The ensuing spring produced a hysteria greater than that of the previous year. Stories were so spectacular that detached observers wondered whether the cause of the mania was gold or gab. How does it happen, asked one reporter, that summer hotels generally burn down in winter, and that stories of Black Hills wealth become more enticing just when spring trade begins? Old reliable California Joe, a perennial favorite who could miraculously appear in several places at once, came out of his grave to state that he had seen thirty-four dollars’ worth of gold taken out of one pan. Edwin Curley, an inquisitive traveler representing the *London Field*, facetiously noted:

The Yellow Fever in Nebraska Sweeping the Whole State and Decimating the People! The Patients rather like it, and when the Fever takes them off they confidently expect to enter the Golden Gates of PARADISE! After a short season of mild Purgatory; During which they will ride on the horns of the Buffalo; Bunk with the Grizzly Bear; Cheat the Sioux with Short Cropped Hair, and Live on the Livers of the Red Skins!!⁷

He remarked that Patrick O’Mahoss, of Omaha, “is taken very badly. He is to drive a thousand coaches for a thousand days and ten thousand freight wagons at the same time between Cussed Cheyenne and More Cussed Custer, and on the conclusion of these Herculean labors he will be translated to the Olympian Heavens.”⁸

The immigrants met bloody opposition from belligerent Indians. Six Sioux tribes having gone off their reser-

⁶ H. H. Gay to General Campbell, *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotian*, September 15, 1875.

⁷ Edwin A. Curley, *Glittering Gold*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

ventions to combine under the powerful medicine man, Sitting Bull, marauding bands raided small camps. Stories sifted back of swift descents upon isolated gulches, of massacres and scalplings. "Sitting Bull of the North," complained the *New York Times*, "is behaving in a very unhandsome manner."⁹ The manner became even more "unhandsome" as the spring of 1876 brought on an Indian war with a frenzied horde of braves. The Sioux, reinforced by the Northern Cheyennes, assembled in great numbers, mustering probably the largest Indian force ever to operate more or less as a unit.

Army commanders, underestimating both the strength and the determination of the enemy, considered that a few companies of cavalry were enough for the campaign. But this enemy was not scared off by a handful of troopers; furthermore, this enemy used the tactic, unusual among Indians, of concentration of power. Ably led by Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Chief Gall, the hostiles, on June 18, 1876, repulsed General Crook's column on the Rosebud River. One week later they routed Major Reno's detachment with heavy losses, and won the most decisive of all Indian victories by annihilating General Custer's command on the Little Big Horn.

These reverses bitterly affronted national pride, intruding discordantly upon the glorifying orations of patriotic windbags at the recently opened Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. The press howled with rage, went into spasms of indignation over the so-called Custer "massacre," and raved about exterminating the red man. But defeat, jarring the military mind into a sense of reality, caused a rush of reinforcements west, stimulated volunteering, and assured eventual triumph. By late summer truant and frightened

⁹ February 20, 1876.

bands of Indians had voluntarily returned or had been herded back to reservations, and Sitting Bull had fled to Canada. His refusal to budge from that haven led Ambrose Bierce to observe: "And now Sitting Bull is derisively named by the ladies and civilians of his tribe Old-Man-Afraid-of-His-Record."¹⁰ Although sporadic outbreaks occurred for years thereafter, peace of a sort descended, and the government's commissioners officially closed the deal for the Black Hills. On September 26, on terms essentially reaffirming those of 1868, and without the cash indemnity, the Indians relinquished their claim on all lands west of the 103d meridian of longitude. When the President proclaimed this treaty on February 28, 1877, he opened the Hills territory to unrestricted immigration.

During the next six months, fifty thousand "Black Hills Pilgrims" and others flowed from east and west toward the promised land in the biggest stampede in twenty years: miners from Utah, Nevada, and California, bankrupt merchants, unsettled ribbon clerks, idlers hoping for easy pickings, and young men eager and stalwart.¹¹ Agents and speculators lured the adventurous by seductive propaganda that nicely blended truth and stretchers, and that discreetly omitted unfavorable facts. "The gold is here," said one circular composed for eastern cities:

. . . in almost every gulch, on every hillside, on every mountain top, in placers and in quartz. It is here for the poor man and for the capitalist. It is to be divided among

¹⁰ San Francisco *Argonaut*, Vol. I, No. 38 (December 8, 1877), 5.

¹¹ "Pilgrim" was a derisive term for tenderfoot. But the word was used so loosely that the *Deadwood Times* remarked, June 1, 1877: "Beneath the ample folds of the term 'Pilgrim,' are gathered the poet, scholar, capitalist, professional man, and the many exponents of drudgery and toil."

laborers, merchants, mechanics, and manufacturers. There is enough for all who will come, and those who wish to flee from the hard times of the East, and avail themselves of the hidden treasures of this, the last and richest gold field on the globe, had better make their arrangements to come early. This is a show in which the front seats cannot be reserved; the first occupant holds them.¹²

Yes, the gold was there, probably enough for everybody, but that the field was the world's richest was debatable. At any rate, gold was not lying around like bushels of fallen hickory nuts, and the poor man or laborer expecting to scoop it up by the bucketful was due for a rude disappointment.

Governor John M. Thayer of Wyoming encouraged the scramble for front seats by publicizing in New York his belief that "no other portion of the earth's surface contains more of the precious metals in the same space than is found in the Black Hills The gulches for hundreds of miles winding through the Hills can be worked by the shovel and sluice-box alone, without capital to buy the ground or erect machinery; and these are now paying the hardy laborer quite as well as the best portions of California or Montana have ever paid."¹³ Farmer Horace Greeley snorted at that tempting invitation. No doubt, he said, it will induce a good many fools to rush out there without a dime and without reflecting that they might do better by staying home to dig potatoes.

In San Francisco, A. L. Bancroft and Company did its bit to enlarge the rush to Dakota by publishing in 1877 a new *Map of the Black Hills Region Showing the Gold Mining District and the Seat of the Indian War, Drawn by A. G.*

¹² *New York Times*, February 4, 1877.

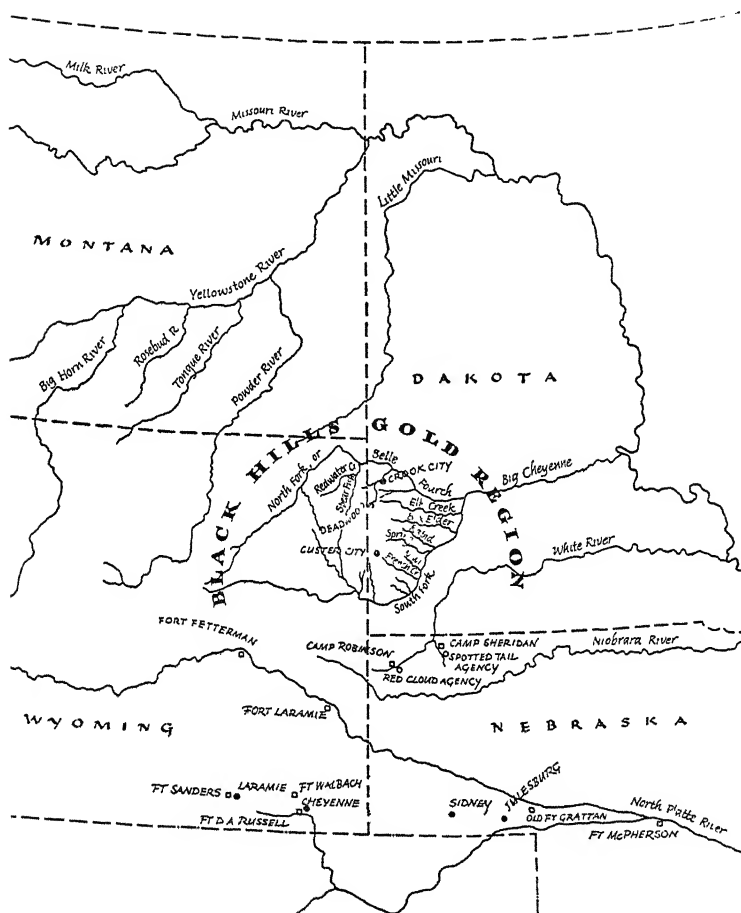
¹³ *New York Tribune*, May 5, 1877.

*Bierce. From Surveys ordered by the War Department.*¹⁴ Pack trains plodded into the Hills, and one hundred freighters a week lumbered through Cheyenne.

Rich strikes produced camps that became towns, some of which flourished briefly and then died. Destined to permanence was the town of Deadwood, founded in 1876 by the discovery of the famous Whitewood Gulch and Deadwood Gulch diggings. Great numbers of prospectors surged in there, not only because of the gold, but also because of the pre-eminence of a devil-may-care atmosphere that gave the place widespread publicity, both horrifying and pleasurable. For several decades the largest town in the district, it became a port of arrival and departure, the site of the First District Court of the Territory, and a business center for Hills citizens, including Ambrose Bierce.

In 1877, the town spread rapidly along the winding defile of Deadwood Gulch as newcomers streamed in by stage loads from Sidney, Cheyenne, Bismarck, and Fort Pierre, by prairie schooner, afoot, and on horseback. On the Bear Buttes road, a toll-gate keeper put up a sign: "Loose pilgrims, free; packed pilgrims, five cents." They jammed hotels and boardinghouses, slept on bar-room floors, and prowled and brawled among the heterogeneous clutter of frame buildings, log huts, and tents. Progressive property owners soon camouflaged raw timbers with imitation brown-stone fronts and imitation mahogany front doors. By early

¹⁴ The Hills "Gold Mining District," which is but a small part of the whole map, was almost certainly not drawn from Bierce surveys—if that is what the title implies. No evidence shows that he was ever in the Hills before 1880. Part of the Wyoming-Montana section of the Bancroft map, however, was no doubt made from Bierce surveys. Topographical data and sketches of this region appear in a notebook he kept as engineering attaché of General William B. Hazen's expedition in 1866, and inscribed: "A. G. Bierce, Route Maps of a Journey from Fort Laramie—Dakota Terr. to Fort Benton—Montana Territory 1866."



MAP OF THE BLACK HILLS REGION

This map is based on a *Map of the Black Hills Region, Showing the Gold Mining District and the Seat of the Indian War, Drawn by A. G. Bierce, From Surveys ordered by the War Department. San Francisco, A. L. Bancroft & Co., 1877.*

(Courtesy Thomas W. Streeter, Morristown, N. J.)

summer the town had an academy, three newspapers, the inevitable Chinatown, four brass bands, three breweries, seventy-three saloons, two churches, numerous bagnios, two competing post offices, and a Palace Barbershop.

Another possession was that amoral Black Hills exotic, Martha Jane Canary, alias Calamity Jane, "the heroine of more adventures than any woman of her age and weight in the west": black-haired, profane, warmhearted, generous, pleasant-eyed when calm, green-eyed when aroused, roughly masculine and tearfully feminine—a legendary character at the age of twenty-two. Yet vivid were heroic memories of the late Wild Bill Hickok, a soft-spoken, courteous, handsome man, with blond ringlets falling upon the broad shoulders of his buckskin coat, thin lips partly hidden by a straw-colored mustache, and blue eyes clear and steady. Swift and lethal with his silver-mounted revolvers, he had survived some thirty duels only to be untimely assassinated in the Number Ten Saloon by a dastardly shot through the back of the head.

The "rapid succession of pistol shots," a frequent press line, might mean either a casual altercation or the exuberance of two-bit whiskey, which exhilarated when it did not knock down. A flair for the lavish and flamboyant foreshadowed Hollywood. George Shingle opened his new saloon, "a perfect little gem in every particular," with a tony soiree. Messrs. Brown and Thum started a bank with all the fanfare of a première: party vests, ties, gloves, and a platoon of George Shingle's waiters to supply gentlemen who desired "anything in his line of refreshment."¹⁵ In sharp contrast to the miners' haberdashery of woolen shirts, top

¹⁵ M. C. Thum, as cashier of the First National Bank of Deadwood, will have dealings later, including a lawsuit, with Ambrose Bierce and his mining company.

boots, and butternut pants "a shade between a salt mackerel and a codfish," smart dressers sported the boiled shirt studded with ounce nuggets.

The Gem Theater, "well supplied with lady waiters," regaled its patrons with Flora Bell, Kittie Mittall, and the Queen of Song, Miss Susie Miller. Kitty Le Roy, her inviting curves belied by a cold and calculating eye, danced there until Sam Curley, her jealous husband, came back to town and shot her and, also, himself. Gentlemen had smokes and drinks during the performance and between acts milled around passing the time of day with box-holders, among whom were generally a number of eminent trollops, like Cis Clinton and Denver Mollie Johnson. The Bella Union, a variety theater, drew equally well with a rousing cancan every night. Both houses attracted audiences by noisy band concerts from their balconies and by selling tickets for fifty cents, each with a detachable coupon redeemable at the bar.

Hardly within the pale of thespian art was the Melo-deon, half theater and half gambling joint. For a while the town was a sharper's paradise, where girl dealers of faro, monte, chuckaluck, and twenty-one raked in winnings twenty-four hours a day. Up and down the streets, lotteries, shell games, bummers, land sharks, con men, and con women deftly fleeced the unwary. Claim jumping and lot jumping kept owners on continual sentry duty and made business for sixty lawyers. The salted mine gulled both the tenderfoot and the old hand, one of the most ingenious methods being to fire a shotgun load of gold dust into a shaft.

On lonely roads highwaymen who held up the Sidney-Deadwood stage were not backward about shooting it out with driver or passengers. The treasure coach, "Old Ironsides," had to be guarded by shotgun messengers, of whom the most deadly was an amiable killer named Boone May, a

calm and fearless man admirably equipped to combat the lawlessness of a reckless country. In one of his celebrated exploits, he rubbed out the troublesome bandit, Frank Towle, at Robbers' Roost. Next day, hearing of a two-thousand-dollar reward for the outlaw, dead or alive, Boone returned to the scene of the shooting, nonchalantly sliced off the head of his victim, and carried this evidence in a gunny sack to Cheyenne. Ambrose Bierce, who later also employed Boone May as shotgun messenger, paid him tribute as "a man who has captured and killed more road agents and horse thieves than any man in the west; whose name is a terror to all evil-doers in the [district]; whose fidelity and trustworthiness are as famous as his courage" ¹⁶

Notwithstanding banditry, homicide, and swindle, Deadwood boomed in 1877. Business property on Main Street brought one hundred dollars a front foot, and a three-cent stamp sold for a quarter. The editor of the *Deadwood Times* announced that he was "prospecting through the murky channels of literature solely for the colors," and that he would not accept for subscriptions "sauerkraut, coon skin, frozen onions, second-hand blankets, watered bug juice, empty fruit cans, etc." Alert to local enterprise, he cited a forward-looking citizen: "Mrs. Marquette, whose husband poisoned himself on Monday, married again on Tuesday morning before her dead husband was fairly cold. This is only a proof of the business-like character of some of the denizens of Deadwood." ¹⁷ With the gusto of a Mark Twain, he followed the news down to "A midnight dog fight with good attendance," and reported on the drunks

¹⁶ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 2, 1880. The *Black Hills Correspondence*, I, 78-79. Hereafter this source will be referred to by names of correspondents, date, volume number, and page.

¹⁷ Deadwood, Dakota Territory, *Black Hills Daily Times*, May 23, 1877.

"lying as good as dead in barn yards or alleys," and "put to air on the debris piles."

Deadwood was the Black Hills counterpart of the Comstock Lode's Virginia City: by day bustling with business, by night a sort of raucous carnival, with saloon doors lighted by colored transparencies, bands blaring, and streets thronged with miners, harlots, and bummers ready for fight or frolic. So much ebullience attracted press correspondents from all over the country, even from the London *Times*—enough newspaper deadheads, as one editor sarcastically remarked, to start a literary society. They sent out long dispatches shivery with shock and fascination. The *New York Times* man turned in many graphic columns punctuated with tut-tuts and startled gasps. Aghast at such uninhibited hell-raising, he concluded that "Deadwood can be best described as a disorderly, sickly, sinful city."¹⁸

For miles around, in Whitewood, Gold Run, Bob Tail, Black Tail, and other gulches, prospectors staked claims and tore up the earth. The threat of Indian raids was always present, or at least everybody thought it was. Any wandering redskin rated exclamatory headlines—"The Roving Bands That Now Infest the Foot Hills are as Thick as Lice on Papooses"—and a fretful column about massacres in prospect. Actually, the danger of being attacked by savages was considerably less than that of being plundered and murdered by allegedly civilized whites. Besides, the Indian threat, if any, was mitigated by a bounty on scalps. When the commissioners of Lawrence County were reported to have offered a reward of \$250 for the body of any Indian found in the county, the story was that some of the boys said: "Make it scalps, Jedge . . . some of them Injuns weighs 180

¹⁸ *New York Times*, August 13, 1877.

pound, an' how can we get 'em in? Us boys expect to get one a week apiece."¹⁹

Mining was not so simple or profitable as alluring propaganda had implied. As promised, gold was there, but not to be easily won, and for every claim that made its owner rich, a dozen other claims paid scarcely more than grub. Quartz ledges did not yield to simple methods, and as for gravel mining, propagandists had carelessly failed to mention that pan and sluice box were useless without water, which was scarce. Getting the gelt meant hauling wagon-loads of pay dirt to distant water and the slow labor of panning or rocking—that being, as one old-timer aptly says, a lively operation something like rubbing the belly with one hand while scratching the head with the other.²⁰ Swinging the pick and heaving the shovel, squatting half in the water until the haunches numbed, becoming water-sodden and mud-plastered: all that was hard, exhausting work. No job for a lily. As one disgruntled critic grumbled: "The Black Hills region is a d—d good place for women and dogs, but h—ll on men and horses."²¹

Among thousands of gold seekers, only a few hundred worked diggings. The others merely hung around, scraping along as day laborers when they could find jobs, otherwise being no more than tramps, broke and disillusioned. "Hundreds of men in the city without a dollar and more expected,"

¹⁹ *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotian*, August 6, 1877.

²⁰ The old-timer is Ben Rush, who lives in the hills near Rockerville. He showed me how to work a rocker, and sat in the shade while I sweated at it. Briskly shaking with one hand while pouring water with the other, I found that his description was pat. I also found how hard the work is and how easily one may catch gold fever. Any show of color in the pan makes the fever rise and stimulates the hope that the next painful will strike it rich.

²¹ Rapid City, Dakota Territory, *Black Hills Daily Journal*, January 11, 1879.

said the *Deadwood Times*. Lacking means to live, skill at mining, and the stomach for hardship, they could only wish for something to turn up, particularly word of a new bonanza in some other region whither they might stampede, their hopes revived in a resurrection of golden dreams. A large part of the population did little more than rush fruitlessly from place to place. This transience led some shrewd merchants to put up their buildings in sections, like movie sets, that could be easily taken down and carted off to other boom towns.

When midsummer brought news of strikes in the Big Horn Mountains—every story “with larger nuggets attached”—and of gold discoveries in the Little Missouri and Powder River country, many floaters lighted out. At the same time, a perceptible falling-off of immigration indicated that the Hills fever had passed its peak. By 1878, departure of the inept and bankrupt had decreased the population of the district by about one-half and had reduced Deadwood to comparative dullness. Overstocked merchants were short of ready cash, and sales under chattel mortgage of mining machinery, mines, bar fixtures, and household goods testified to many a failure. Yet the editor of the *Deadwood News* emphatically maintained that the camp was not dead, “not by a very considerable.”

Indeed, substantial investments, including over \$1,000,000 of California and eastern capital, built forty or more stamp mills at Central City and elsewhere and increased gold production. The treasure coach carried so heavy a weight of bullion that the springs barely cleared the axles, and bandits were still as eager as ever to lay hands on the box. “They are trying to beat the Black Hills road agents with an iron-clad coach,” said Ambrose Bierce, “but it is believed this will merely alter the character of these gentlemen’s opera-

tion from placer-working—dropping the driver with a shotgun and taking the treasure box off the top of the coach—to regular mining, with improved machinery and a diamond drill.”²²

Nevertheless, in and around Deadwood life became less erratic. With a population of five thousand, the pulse was strong but not so jumpy as it slowed down toward the sedate beat of humdrum respectability. If inhabitants were desirous of gaining gold, they seemed equally desirous of establishing behavior on the level of the genteel. Top hats appeared on week days, and a bicycle club, “private and select” hops, fancy masquerade balls, apostles of temperance, a course of lectures sponsored by the Red Ribbon Society, and an organization of old settlers. Gay ladies like Pop Corn Jenny, Shark-toothed Sal, and Beef-lipped Angelina were occasionally hauled into court, and right-minded citizens deplored the wickedness imported by visitors from New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston. Civilization had so far encroached that refusing an invitation to drink ceased to be an insult. The *New York Times* correspondent reported, perhaps with a relieved sigh, that “Deadwood is as orderly as any Eastern city of its size. Street broils and murders, that were so frequent at first, do not now occur.”²³

Not that the place had gone flabby or lost its spunk. When it went the way of San Francisco and other wooden towns in a great fire on September 26, 1879, inhabitants were up and doing at once. Quick-thinking men rigged sluice boxes in the creek and washed two thousand pennyweights of gold from the ashes of store sites. New foundations went down almost before the charred remains were cold—“From the ashes of desolation she again springs into being—though

²² San Francisco *Argonaut*, Vol. III, No. 16 (October 26, 1878), 9.

²³ *New York Times*, May 4, 1879.

mantled with the blackness of despair, she rises with undaunted spirit and offers the gauge of defiance to the hard fate which has overwhelmed her.”²⁴ Full of civic pride, the editor of the *Deadwood Times* challenged anybody to show him another three-year-old western town that could “get up” a two-million-dollar fire.

As the largest and most robust city in the district, Deadwood got the greatest share of enthralled attention, but other towns had their day, and some are still having it. Rapid City, on the fringe of the Hills in Pennington County, rested on a solid base of sturdy pioneers gaining a foothold, founding a community, and holding out against the Indians. Its steady growth made one eastern reporter remark upon “Rapid City’s Rapidity,” although it never achieved the *éclat* of its Deadwood Gulch rival, either in mining or in derring-do. Nevertheless, as a transportation point on both the Sidney-Deadwood and Pierre-Deadwood stage routes, Rapid City did a good merchandising business, and in the twentieth century it outstripped the other in population to become the metropolis of the district.

Camps like Custer, Gayville, Crook City, Rockford, Pactola, and Hill City enjoyed brief heydays of prosperous hubbub, then subsided. Among Hills towns that are today only ghosts of their once-vigorous selves, one that experienced the cycle of high tidal rise and low ebb was Rockerville, where the Black Hills Placer Mining Company accelerated a boom, and where for some months in 1880 Ambrose Bierce lived and struggled and met undeserved defeat.

²⁴ Rapid City *Journal*, October 4, 1879.

2. *Rockerville and the Great Flume*

AMONG the earliest arrivals in the Hills was the wiry Irishman, Captain Jack Crawford. A veteran of the Forty-eighth Pennsylvania Volunteers, he became a famous scout with Generals Crook and Merritt and later achieved territorial celebrity as a homespun poet. In early March, 1877, while trailing a wounded deer, as the story goes, he discovered gold in a small gulch about thirteen miles southwest of Rapid City. As the news leaked out, prospectors swarmed out there in a small-sized rush, camping in a long gulch not so wide or deep as Deadwood Gulch, and verdant with cottonwoods and pine. The settlers called the camp a town, first named Captain Jack's Dry Diggin's, but that unwieldy label was soon discarded in favor of Rockerville, after the omnipresent miner's rocker. The site of the discovery became Captain Jack's Gulch, and the site of the town Rockerville Gulch. The principal stream, just north of Rockerville Gulch, was Spring Creek, a tributary of the south fork of the Cheyenne River.

Gelt getters fanned out into the many tributary gulches, later to be known as Pony, Carr, Dutch John's, Hoodlum, Red Rock, Strawberry, Henderson, Swallow Tail, Coulson,

Peg-leg, and so forth. Jackass Gulch got its name from a tenderfoot who did not know enough to stop digging when he hit bedrock, but kept on until he broke through false bedrock, struck pay dirt, and packed it out on a jackass. A good many tenderfeet landed in this camp, and they often succeeded by just such pigheaded persistence. A veteran miner grumbled: "The damn fools will dig for gold where an old miner would not expect any, and nine times in ten they strike it rich."

As prospectors picked away at the gravel of bars and gulches, they found the richest placer deposits in the Black Hills, thus verifying the earlier estimate of the government's geologist, Professor Jenney. After his inspection trip in 1875, he said of the Spring Creek region: ". . . the gold placers of this district, worked by the systems and processes which the experience of twenty-five years has led the miners of the Pacific slope to adopt, will pay a handsome return for the labor required to open the deposits and extract the gold."¹ Sensational strikes—one to three dollars a pan, and even two to five dollars a pan—sent more gold seekers pounding out over the big rolling hills from Rapid City. These placers "astonish the world by their richness," said the *Rapid City Journal*, and rival Deadwood published a handsome calculation of potential wealth: "Experts claim that the amount of gold now in the Rockerville basin will amount to \$2,336,600,000."²

Within eighteen months of Captain Jack's discovery, the town was a going concern of over three hundred more or less permanent residents, and probably of an additional several hundred occasionals whose names never appeared on

¹ Walter P. Jenney, *The Mineral Wealth . . . of the Black Hills of Dakota*, 30.

² Deadwood Press, February 6, 1880.

a tax list.³ Log and frame business buildings lined wide Main Street running along the floor of Rockerville Gulch: three hotels, including a Delmonico, seven saloons, a bank, the Exchange Billiard Hall, B. Heuniche's brewery, four bakeries, ten general stores, and a jewelry shop. Ranging up the hills on either side were some sixty cabins and a cluster of tents.

Old hands said that the place looked more like a California town of forty-nine than any other in the Hills. Smoke curled lazily from chimneys of mud-chinked cabins, where fires were always kept alive. In dooryards, among a clutter of cans and bottles, the familiar pick, pan, and shovel stood handy by the door. All about were prospect holes, long ridges of tailings, and clumps of blue-shirted miners. A strike anywhere in the neighborhood stampeded the whole town. Everybody rushed pell-mell to the scene and hammered in a forest of stakes bounding claims. If overlapping claims caused disputes, they were generally settled either peaceably or without consequences more violent than a bloody nose or slugged jaw.

Although the town looked like rough and ready forty-nine, its behavior was more decorous than that of the usual hell-for-leather mining town. Like any eastern village, it had a baseball team, a lecture lyceum, a glee club with "lady vocalists," and entertainments "musical and literary." For a time it even had its own weekly paper, *The Black Hills Miner*, but the infant expired after a month or two.

Foibles were human but not vicious. Gambling was so vastly popular that, as one old-timer put it, on any Sunday morning you could wade through the cards littering Main

³ The Rapid City *Journal* of June 1, 1878, gave Rockerville a population of 300; the same paper of September 21, 1878, 800; the *New York Times* of May 4, 1879, 700; the United States Census of 1880, 321.

Street. The thirsty swigged huge quantities of Heuniche's lager and whiskey by the demijohn and the barrel, a pastime that might cause some trading of punches during a Fourth of July celebration. But Rockerville had no theaters, no cancan, no sprightly daughters of joy, no shooting scrapes, no homicides, and no claim jumping.⁴ Nobody, in a mood of alcoholic bonhomie, shot out the lights and shot up the town, and no road agents held up travelers packing dust over the lonesome road to Rapid City. About the place was none of the six-shooter bravado that has been fixed in the movie-corrupted imagination as the normal climate of a pioneer western town. Said a Rapid City reporter:

The town has grown as few towns have in the Black Hills, and it is no ephemeral growth. The ravines and hillsides are dotted with well finished buildings and business houses The town itself is cleanly, orderly, has the smell of freshness that attaches to prosperous villages, and the bustle at night when "Johnnie comes marching home" from his daily toil in the mines, gives the plucky burg an air of metropolitan buzz.⁵

The only drawback to these rich diggings was the usual one, scarcity of water. Continually the cry went up: Water! Water! Like corn-belt farmers praying for rain, miners blessed every downpour, waiting only until the deluge stopped to seize shovel and pan and rush out into the mud.

⁴ According to Rockerville miners' law, a claim could not be jumped if the owner satisfied his "assessment". i.e., put in on his claim at least one day's work a week. If he failed to do so, his claim could be legally jumped.

⁵ *Rapid City Journal*, July 6, 1878. Ben Rush says that the alleged lawlessness and violence of mining towns has been grossly exaggerated. Except for Deadwood, which during its first year or two appears to have been wild enough, the evidence bears him out. Rockerville was no staid New England village, but it was less violent than the modern city. It should be remembered that for the vanished six-shooter we have substituted the more deadly automobile.

When they had water, they sluiced night and day. In dry seasons, they hauled wagon-loads of pay dirt, perhaps for miles, to Rockerville, where W. H. Beedle kept a steam pump going on his own claim and leased the same water to miners below him at forty-five dollars a week each. Because of the expense of hauling, leasing, and washing, the dirt had to yield about four dollars a cubic yard, else an owner would throw up his claim and look for a richer one. Sorely needed was a plentiful supply of cheap water.

That any problem should baffle American ingenuity was unthinkable, particularly when the solution promised the reward of such a fabulous quantity of buried gold. Broached early in the life of the town was the possibility of tapping Spring Creek, ditching the water into Rockerville, and leasing it there. "A ditch could be built from Spring Creek," said the *Rapid City Journal*, "near Sheridan, to Rockerville, at a cost of \$12,000 to \$15,000, giving miners in Rockerville a good supply of water. Let some of our capitalists take hold of the matter, for there is 'millions in it.'"⁶ Western man's acquaintance with the bywords of Mark Twain's Colonel Sellers—and with his futility—did not prevent anybody from conjuring millions out of a clever notion, or out of a hole in the ground. Still, the Spring Creek suggestion looked feasible, and before long energetic citizens did take hold of the matter.

In 1879, an outfit called the Rockerville and Spring Creek Hydraulic Company started ditching near Sheridan, with the purpose of continuing seventeen miles to the golden bars of Rockerville. The prime movers of this enterprise were apparently John Rigby, Sophia Hale, and Captain Ichabod M. West. On record is their purchase of water in Mallory Gulch, Bakers Park Gulch, and Spring Creek, and

⁶ July 20, 1878.

their intention "to carry the same by ditch and flume to Rockerville."⁷ Associated with the venture also were two engineers, Palmer Smith and Myron Willsie, formerly general agent of the Sidney and Black Hills Stage Company.

Of this group, the most ambitious, flamboyant, and persuasive was Captain West. Like many another western adventurer, he was a Civil War veteran, having served in the Eleventh Michigan Cavalry, and having been honorably discharged with the rank of first lieutenant in 1865. How he came by the title of captain does not appear. In 1876, he had blown into Gayville, near Deadwood, where, according to Ambrose Bierce, he "kept a little drinking saloon . . . was a good carpenter and got a contract to build the De Smet mill [at Central City] built a good one . . . under an engineer who compelled him to. Otherwise he was almost wholly unknown anywhere, so far as I can learn."⁸ Then he landed in Rockerville, where he prospected, acquired a number of claims and water rights, and became popular as an affable, honest, and industrious citizen. Newspaper stories described him as a mining expert of varied experience in the gold fields of Australia, Colorado, and California.

As the ditching progressed, West and the engineers sketched a more grandiose plan: building a long bedrock dam at Sheridan, and from that point constructing a huge wooden flume tunneling through hills, winding across and around gulches seventeen and three-quarters miles to Rockerville. Such an affair was of more costly magnitude than any likely to be undertaken by local talent. It called for large-scale financing. While preliminary surveys were under way, West invited experienced mining men to inspect

⁷ Location Certificate Record, Pennington County, Dakota Territory, Book C, 320.

⁸ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., August 2, 1880. I, 40-41.

the locale and to counsel on ways and means. F. A. Babcock, superintendent of the Rhoderick Dhu mine, was much impressed. He advised the Captain to look for capital in New York, and he paved the way with a strong letter to John McGinnis, Jr., of the New York brokerage firm of McGinnis Brothers and Fearing. After a brief summary of his inspection tour, Babcock said:

Spring Valley water . . . can be carried over any of the Rockerville bars . . . [Captain West's] preliminary surveys are now being made

Here, then, I place in your hands the largest mining project that has ever been laid before New York, and out of which you can gather an immense fortune

In Capt. West you have a man . . . [who] bears universally the character of a conscientiously honest man, a thorough engineer and mechanic.

I have induced him to go to N. Y.⁹

If that was high-pressure salesmanship, it was unnecessary. Easterners with money to invest had become as feverish over mining as their brethren on the Pacific Coast, and New York brokers were swamped with orders for mine stocks. Such phenomena as the regular dividends of the Homestake Company, operating at Lead City, near Deadwood, and the heady rise of its stock from four to forty dollars a share put Wall Street gentlemen into a willing mood to chip in.

McGinnis was interested. No doubt other letters passed back and forth before he acted, but at any rate within a month or so a company began to take shape. By early fall, organization had so far advanced as to acquire a corporation title to mining property and water rights at Rockerville. Still, hedged with the caution that preserves the substantial

⁹ F. A. Babcock to John McGinnis, Jr., July 1, 1879. *The Black Hills Placer Mining Company Report*, 1879, 25-26.

bank roll, action was not impetuous, nor did it rely solely on faith and testimonials.

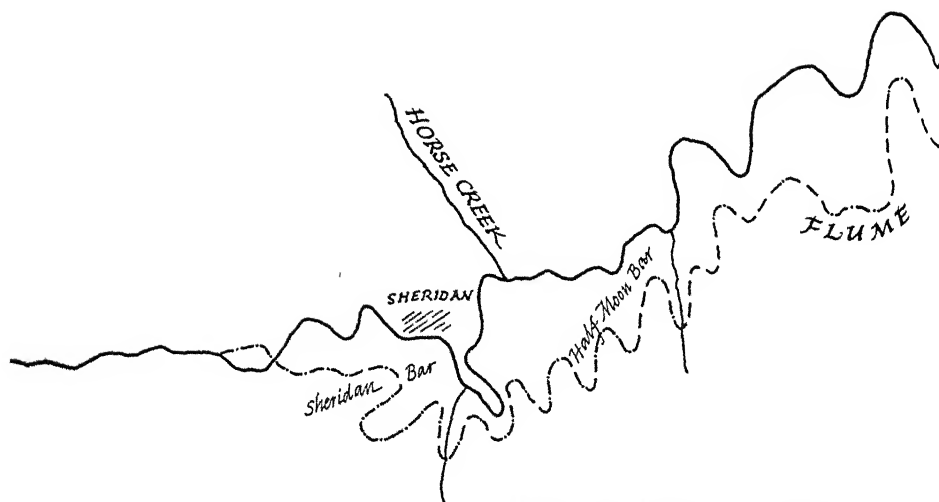
To look over the Dakota country and to investigate the flume scheme, the embryo company sent a man named Marcus Walker out to the Hills in October to report on what he found there. Accompanied by Captain West, Babcock, and Willsie, Walker spent a week around Sheridan and Rockerville, measuring water supply, watching dirt being washed by pan and wagon load from many locations, asking a multitude of questions, and busily calculating. Yields ran from about two to seven dollars a yard, he figured. Several days of observation and calculation convinced him that the region was indeed rich and that the flume plan guaranteed enormous profits. While various natives poured into his receptive ear splendid tales of huge strikes seen or heard of, he excitedly estimated that if the company leased water at only 25 cents per miner's inch per day, the net return would be \$3,350 per day, or \$100,000 per month. He also looked into the company's property and water titles, which were certified as sound by a Deadwood lawyer, B. G. Caulfield. All these data Walker incorporated in a long "Report." When Ambrose Bierce read it about eight months later, he said:

. . . Walker's "report" read with interest. Do you know how it was got? They "salted" him, West and his gang did, systematically. They "coralled" and "herded" him; "laid for him" everywhere "fenced him in" and "played him." One of the chief conspirators in this familiar game has given it away to me.¹⁰

Perhaps Walker was salted, but if so the fraud must have been skillful, for he was a most careful man. When he inquired into any matter, he questioned, he probed, he fussed

¹⁰ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 30, 1880. II, 194-95.

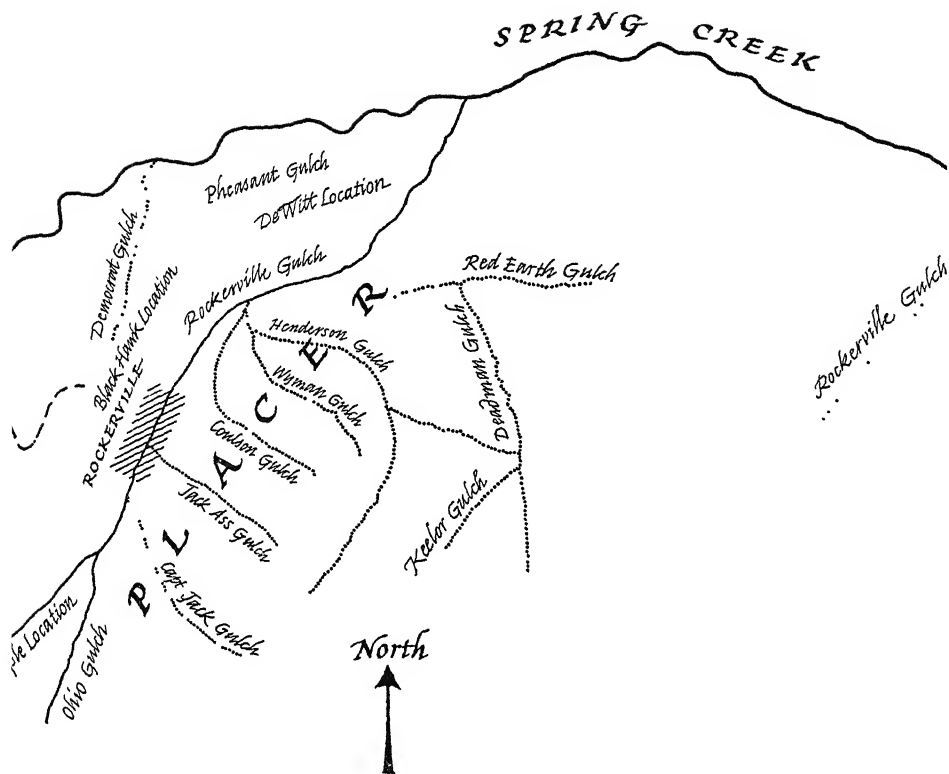
SCALE
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MAP OF SPRING CREEK

This map is based on The Spring Creek and Rockerville Flume over it, worried it, and picked at it until he became an intolerable nuisance. Probably for those very reasons his report carried weight in New York. Yet even if he had been played for a dupe, the fact remained that the rich Rockerville gold field was a potential source of profitable returns.

The road to his objective being now open, Captain West went to New York, armed with letters of unqualified recommendation and a sheaf of plans, specifications, and engineer's estimates. With him went a Hills businessman,



AND ROCKERVILLE FLUME

Map, in *Black Hills Placer Mining Company Report, 1879.*

(Courtesy New York Public Library)

Charles A. Girdler, who, being acquainted in the city, served as introducer. The Captain's winning ways, supported by the endorsements of solid Hills citizens, his grasp of details structural and financial pleased everybody. He seemed the best of many auguries, all of which were excellent. The result was the Black Hills Placer Mining Company, incorporated under the laws of New York and Dakota on December 8, 1879. The capital stock was ten million dollars, divided into

200,000 shares at fifty dollars each; but as an inducement 50,000 shares were offered at 10 per cent of par value, or five dollars each, "full paid and unassessable."

The company opened an office at 37-39 Wall Street, and published a prospectus, complete with a description of placer mining and the proposed flume, Walker's data, Will-sie's estimates, and a map. "The trustees of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company," ran the argument,

submit their project to capitalists and others who desire to take an interest in an exceptionally safe mining operation, confident that it will be recognized at once, by those well informed, as *the best* that has ever been offered to the public.

The company has secured the absolute and exclusive control of [Spring Creek] waters, and will at once commence the construction of a flume for conveying them . . . to the rich placer grounds about Rockerville . . . at which point the whole Red Earth district, covering an area of about 300 square miles, rich with the precious metal . . . is, through possession of the water supply, practically at this company's disposal.

It is estimated that the claims already deeded to this company . . . contain thousands of millions of cubic yards of auriferous gravel that will be worked by this company and its successors for over a hundred years at great profit . . .¹¹

That prediction might be overoptimistic, but the expectation of profit was nevertheless well founded. This venture was no wildcat speculation. The region was rich, the mining operation did look safe, and the company had a first-rate chance of success. To build the dam and flume, the trustees offered for sale "one quarter only, of the full

¹¹ *The Black Hills Placer Mining Company, Report, 1879, 3-4.*

paid stock . . . at *ten per cent.*" Subscription books being open, subscribers were invited to step up. They did. A Columbia University professor was said to have been so enamored of the scheme that he subscribed \$20,000. The 50,000 shares at 10 per cent were soon snapped up, and the treasury had \$250,000 with which to construct the works and to start them going. This sum would have been ample had it been spent fairly and squarely, but during the next six months so much of it drained away in mismanagement and fraud that both works and company suffered.

The president of this corporation was General Alexander Shaler. He was not a well-known financier, but he had social standing as an old member of New York's élite Seventh Regiment, also an honorable war record of service in major campaigns of the Army of the Potomac. Having commanded the First United States Chasseurs, who became the Sixty-fifth New York Volunteers, he earned the rank of brigadier in 1863, and of brevet major general of Volunteers in 1865. In postwar years, as commander of the First Division of the New York National Guard, Shaler had a certain military reputation, but his career was not otherwise distinguished. A short term as president of the New York Fire Department showed some leaning toward municipal politics. A man of fifty-two, he had a prominent nose, unruly hair, and the long droopy mustaches of a Chinese mandarin. Heavy-lidded, half-closed eyes made him appear continually half-asleep—or as if he were veiling his intentions. To prospective stockholders he expressed "the fullest confidence that the results of the Company's operations will exceed the highest estimates made."

Vice-president was John McGinnis, Jr. Born in New Jersey in 1831, he moved to Illinois, where he married the daughter of the governor in 1856. In 1863, he and three

others entered into an agreement with Ninian Edwards, captain and commissary of subsistence in the United States Volunteer service, to supply rations to posts and hospitals in the military district of Illinois. Removing to New York in the late 1860's, McGinnis there engaged in the brokerage business. A man of probity, he was one of the strongest officials in the Black Hills Company and one of the most sincere. He had so much faith in the Rockerville project that he bought some seventy-eight claims on Sheridan Bar, Half Moon Bar, Spring Creek, and elsewhere, also water rights, and deeded this property to the company for one dollar and other valuable considerations. If all others had been as unselfish as McGinnis, the story might have been different.

Secretary and treasurer was the fussy Marcus Walker. On his career, no data are available beyond the fact that he lived in Brooklyn. What his business was, and whether he was a moneyed man or merely hoped to be, do not appear. At any rate, his personality makes him seem the proper person to write up voluminous minutes and to keep a tight fist on the money bags.

The company's counsel was the New York law firm of Chamberlain, Carter, and Eaton, of whom the latter was most involved. Sherburne Blake Eaton was a native of Massachusetts. Soon after graduation from Yale in 1862, he enlisted in the 124th Ohio Infantry, in which he served as adjutant until promoted to the rank of captain eight months later. The midwestern farm boys found him "a scholarly gentleman," though "a little stylish." But, said one of them, "we found him brave in action, and that, like charity, covers a multitude of other seeming defects in a soldier."¹²

¹² G. W. Lewis, *The Campaigns of the 124th Regiment Ohio Volunteer Infantry*, 169.



Courtesy of the late Mrs. Grace D. Bussing, Pierceton, Indiana

Ambrose Bierce about 1800



Courtesy Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio

Sherburne B. Eaton

When the regiment joined the brigade of General William B. Hazen in 1863, Eaton was attached to the General's staff. There he met another member of that staff, Acting Topographical Officer, Lieutenant Ambrose Bierce, Ninth Indiana. The two became good friends during subsequent hard campaigning, when the brigade was badly cut up in the bitter fighting of Chickamauga, Missionary Ridge, Resaca, and Pickett's Mill. For Bierce, unschooled but eager for knowledge, Eaton's informed and speculative mind was probably one source of attraction. A stronger one was that he achieved what few others did, sympathetic understanding of the sensitive and difficult lieutenant, who responded with a trusting confidence and a high regard he rarely gave to anybody. He appears to have felt closer to Eaton than to any other friend in his whole life.

In the Atlanta campaign, Eaton was severely wounded at the crossing of Peach Tree Creek in 1864, winning from crusty General Hazen mention as "an officer of rare intelligence and merit." After the war he was for some months a Treasury Department agent in Alabama, where Bierce served in the same capacity, their association there cementing the friendship. Then Eaton practiced law in Chicago until he moved to New York, where by 1879 he had won distinction as a corporation attorney.

Among company trustees and important stockholders were William Dowd, president of the Bank of North America; George R. Blanchard, of the Erie Railroad; General Joseph S. Smith, of Bangor, Maine; Philip Tillinghast, William H. Male, Colonel Augustus G. Paine, Charles E. Ammi-down, and Cornelius Vanderbilt. So impressive a phalanx of well-heeled adherents seemed to guarantee this company a brilliant future.

On January 10, 1880, the directors and Captain West

signed a contract whereby he agreed, as contractor, "to construct for the said Company its Dam, Flume, Trestle-work, Bulkhead, Sluiceways, et cetera, pursuant to certain plans and specifications hereto annexed, the same to be completed on or before the first of August, 1880, and the said West agrees on or before said day to turn over the same to the said Company in complete and perfect order"—all of that work to be done for \$198,500.¹³ To stimulate immediate action, the treasurer on the same day handed Captain West \$15,000.

These doings made Rockerville citizens dream of bright days ahead. They welcomed news of the proposed great flume, which promised to end their water troubles, and welcomed also the triumphant return of Captain West, who was the man of the hour. His popularity enhanced by elevation to the superintendency of a wealthy corporation backed by millions of dollars, he rated loud cheers and practically unlimited financial credit.

Winter was not propitious for construction, but the Captain bestirred himself. He rattled in and out of Deadwood and Rapid City "in his own conveyance," letting sub-contracts and checking up on the company's title to water and property rights. These, notwithstanding attorney Caulfield's clearance, some parties disputed. But Captain West finagled adjustment, and the *Rapid Journal* reported on January 24: "We are pleased to hear that the only adverse right against the great Spring Creek and Rockerville Fluming Company has been compromised, and now that important enterprise will move ahead to success over a smooth road." The company owned, or believed that it owned,

¹³ Extracts from the Minutes of a Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Black Hills Placer Mining Co., August 9, 1880. Letterbooks, I, n.p.

over fifteen hundred claims involving hundreds of acres of promising bars and gulches, and water rights galore. The road to success seemed smooth as a boulevard, and the Captain felt so confident that he spoke of continuing the flume from Rockerville thirteen miles farther to Rapid City.

The company's consulting engineer, Palmer Smith, having departed for San Domingo, Willsie took over. Nobody had suspected him of being an engineer, but he turned out to be, as one reporter said, "exactly the right man in the right place," even though uninformed on the practical details of placer mining. By the middle of February, Willsie was on the job, locating the route of the flume. The well-conceived design called for a three-hundred-foot dam near Sheridan, for blasting long tunnels through rocky hills, for many trestles, two of which were eighty feet high, and for a twisting, tortuous course snaking around the sides of gulches in hairpin turns and horseshoe curves. So skillful was the design and so gradual the drop per mile that even today old Rapid City residents who saw this structure must reason themselves out of a belief that it ran uphill. They still praise it as a splendid engineering feat, which it was.

Within the next six weeks, hundreds of laborers moved in along the line to dig, hack, tote, and sweat. This big construction job was handmade, the product of human brawn and four-footed horsepower, without benefit of bulldozer, portable power saw, or electric crane. Axmen cleared a swath seventy-five feet wide on each side of the right of way to prevent burning trees from falling on the flume during forest fires. A Deadwood subcontractor put up a sawmill near Sheridan, sawed up to forty thousand feet of logs a day, and at night floated the planks down the completed portion of the flume, which moved ahead at the rate of eighty rods a day. The flume was forty-two by forty-eight

inches, made of inch and a half planks tied together with timber every four feet, and placed on six by six sawed cords. Planks, ties, side braces, caps, sills, and batting added up to 3,600,000 feet of lumber, trestles to 160,000 feet more.

Bull trains freighted in, all the way from Pierre, keg after keg of square-sided cut nails, together with two miles of hydraulic pipe in twenty-foot sections. The once silent wilderness resounded with the thud of axes and the tremendous bustle of men and teams. Hills papers reported daily and statistically the number of men on the job, size of planking, height of trestles, and rate of progress. This flume was a great event, of which much was expected.

Rockerville began to boom. Miners, washing dirt taken out during the winter, made cleanups that were good to spectacular, while bull trains rolling in loaded with thousands of pounds of merchandise assured the boys a variety of goods on which to spend their dust. Captain West built a substantial company office. Messrs. Dow, Wood, and Perry put up new business houses. M. W. Robinson enlarged his livery stable, and another liveryman arrived, an articulate tender-foot named Lee Baker, who expressed himself so freely that a reporter remarked: "Mr. Baker has, considering the short . . . time he has been among us, made more improvements, more noise and commotion than many others, and threatens to become the boss business man of the period."¹⁴ Into town came a professional cornet player and a hitherto missing adjunct of a mining camp in the person of one lone Chinese. The influx of company workmen boosting population to a thousand or better, the pace of life accelerated. The local correspondent noted a considerable increase in fighting, gambling, drinking, and carousing, possibly as a result of irritations engendered by the want of, as he delicately

¹⁴ Rapid City *Journal*, May 22, 1880.

put it, *nymphs du pave*. A quota of girls, he said, would "entitle Rockerville to take rank as a first-class mining town."

Prosperity for everybody was only a few miles up the creek. Yet, as the weeks went by, disconcerting events revealed that the affairs of the Black Hills Company were not running as well as all this stir suggested. Some parties claiming prior right to the waters of Spring Creek seemed bent on causing trouble. Other parties had got in ahead of the company's axmen to fell the trees along the route of the flume and deprive the management of this needed timber by hauling it away. Still other parties set out to be rival dam builders on Spring Creek. It looked, said one citizen, as if they were "seeking to create a dam muddle . . . which, if persistently persevered in, may possibly result in a dam lawsuit." A cave-in at the Sheridan dam crippled a workman, and shortly thereafter a similar cave-in killed a man, bringing down sharp criticism of the hazardous methods of Jeff McDermott, the subcontractor there.

Most destructive of prestige and good will was the irregularity in paying off subcontractors and workmen. Pay days having passed without pay, wages were weeks in arrears. Indeed, some laborers, particularly pick and shovel men, had not collected a cent—and never did collect. Such defaulting was inexcusable and damning. As early as the middle of March, the *Deadwood Press* aired rumors of skulduggery rampant in the Black Hills Placer Mining Company and pointed a finger at Captain West as the source of it. Two months later, the *Deadwood Evening News* called the company "the most gigantic fraud ever perpetrated." The *Rapid City Journal* indignantly refuted this charge and stoutly defended Captain West: "No mining Superintendent in the country more fully enjoys the confidence of the

Company he represents . . . none manage more prudently or with better judgment."¹⁵ Nevertheless, suspicion persisted, and such endorsement did not explain why a contractor, supplied with ample money for the job, did not pay his laborers or clear up other legitimate company debts.

The Captain himself appeared to be undisturbed by these rumblings. Exuding infectious confidence, he promised that the flume would be completed on schedule. Industiously he set telephone poles for a line to Rapid City and flitted in a deal of to-ing and fro-ing from the company office, where he had a secretary named H. A. Iddings, to damsite to flume to Deadwood to Rapid. In Rockerville he lived sumptuously in a house known as "the Captain West Residence," described as "an elegant mansion," which was plentifully equipped with large Brussels carpets and a great clutter of furniture "abenized and gilt," also black walnut and ash: settees, chairs, beds, bureaus, marble-topped tables, and whatnots.

He was often in the company of a strikingly handsome woman, a Mrs. Ida Karl, who, with her husband, had moved from Deadwood to Rockerville the previous winter. She captivated everybody by her good looks and refined manners, and in Deadwood she had dazzled the town by appearing on horseback in a silk and velvet habit. Captain West was so attentive and so frequent a caller that the worldly-wise immediately suspected a relationship more intimate than platonic. This conjecture derived some support from the actions of the Captain's daughter—he had a wife and family in Colorado—who visited her father in Rockerville. When she departed almost at once, the story was that she had been outraged by the discovery of how matters stood between her father and the delectable Ida. To a disinterested observer,

¹⁵ March 20, 1880.

the friendship did seem something other than a means of getting Mrs. Karl's advice on flume construction. The whereabouts of Mr. Karl during these goings on and his opinion of the arrangement are not on record.

If Captain West were paying for two establishments, his own and his family's in Colorado, not to speak of buying knickknacks and bijoux for Ida Karl, he needed plenty of money. But Treasurer Walker sent generous sums every four or five weeks, and, besides, the Captain's credit was still good. He bought two fine carriage teams and announced that he thought of building a more elaborate house, of brick, in Rapid City. A little intoxicated on water, he purchased Mammoth Springs, four miles above Rapid, and hired an engineer to survey the route for a pipeline into town. As an entrepreneur, this man must have been hypnotically persuasive. Whether or not he managed prudently for the Black Hills Company, as the *Journal* maintained, he managed very well for himself, and perhaps for Mrs. Karl.

Suspicion of fraud and philandering did not diminish his general popularity or make him socially unacceptable. Both Rapid City and Rockerville chose him as Fourth of July marshal, the conflict being resolved by planning one celebration for Saturday, the other for Monday. The Fourth falling on Sunday, citizens were loath to desecrate the Sabbath by the usual Independence Day brawls. As for Mrs. Karl, she was not a whit daunted by public belief that she lived, intermittently, in sin. She held her head as high as anybody, retaining good will—at least of the male population—by climaxing the social season with a ball in Dow's Hall, and remaining very much in the swim. "... one woman of many," said the *Rapid City Journal*, "and what she undertakes to do she generally makes a success."¹⁶

¹⁶ June 12, 1880.

That Captain West enjoyed the confidence of the company, or at any rate part of it, was demonstrated in late April, when, suffering "nervous prostration superinduced by over-exertion, mental and physical," he was given leave for a trip to California, General Shaler meeting him along the line and accompanying him on this rest cure. Confidence rested also in Treasurer Walker's periodic forwarding of large drafts: \$28,193 on April 26; \$34,318 on May 27.

Thus matters stood by the first of June: an apparently solid company employing a supposedly reputable superintendent, yet showing beneath the surface distressing signs of stress and strain, cracks and crumbling. With two months yet to go until the deadline of August 1, the Sheridan dam was unfinished, the flume was only about one-third completed, unpaid workmen muttered complaints, and other creditors agitated for settlement of accounts. This sorry state of affairs implied poor management or thievery, or both. Stockholders in New York wondered why the substantial sums sent to Rockerville had not produced more tangible results. If General Shaler and Marcus Walker were satisfied with Captain West, others were not. Among the dissatisfied, two of the most influential at the home office were Vice-president McGinnis and attorney Eaton. Evidently they had at the time enough power to bring about a change.

3. *Major A. G. Bierce, General Agent*

WHEN Ross and McKay panned gold in the Black Hills in 1874, Ambrose Bierce, aged thirty-two, was in England, hitting his stride as a successful London journalist with regular contributions to Tom Hood's weekly, *Fun*, to James Mortimer's *Figaro*, and to other papers. His fables, yarns, and articles did not deign to notice the gold-hunting mania in his native land, nor did his letters evince the slightest interest in mining. Indeed, he seemed to have turned his back upon America. Proud of his foreign success and fascinated by things British, he appeared well on the way to becoming an expatriate. He had a wife, a San Francisco belle, nee Mollie Day, and two infant sons, but since he was not a domestic animal, he did not take easily to marriage or to paternity. Harried besides by his mother-in-law, he often absented himself from hearth and home for roistering symposiums with the Fleet Street boys, among whom he shone as a man of biting wit and ready repartee. They called him "Bitter Bierce."

If he had hoped to settle down in England, the hope was frustrated, perhaps by the combined ingenuity of wife and mother-in-law, and the fall of 1875 found him back in San Francisco without a job. He soon landed one in the

Assay Office of the United States Branch Mint, where he remained for over a year. He was not enthusiastic about it, but it was a necessary meal ticket, his flock having been increased by another infant, a daughter, in October. Still, assaying must have impressed upon him the extent and diversity of the mining country. Besides, being close to the mining scene, he could scarcely avoid hearing a great deal about pan and ledge and rocker and bullion, and western papers were peppered with items from gold and silver regions, particularly from the Black Hills. Bancroft's commission to draw the Gold Mining District map, which he probably prepared in 1876 when Deadwood was off to a roaring start, may have directed his attention to Dakota and stirred speculations about taking a flyer at mining.

He had never been a miner, but he had some qualifications: skill in topography, knowledge of engineering mathematics, and a keen mind that could size up a situation and arrive at a practical conclusion. To fill the gaps in his information, he could call upon his father-in-law, Captain H. H. Day, a famous mining expert of long experience in the mines of California and on the Comstock Lode of Nevada. Since Bierce admired the Captain as much as he disliked the Captain's formidable wife, no strained relations need prevent his seeking counsel.

For a variety of reasons, he may have dallied with the notion of taking off for a distant camp: hope of wealth, distaste for his Assay Office job, desire for adventure in a new country, and the desire to run away from marriage and mother-in-law. Perhaps Captain Day himself seemed a good example of a neat method of side-stepping domestic responsibility. While the Day family lived luxuriously in San Francisco, he was far over the mountains in Virginia City or Pioche or some other remote spot. Bierce may have pon-

dered the wisdom of escape, but if he nursed any such thoughts, he did not, being a secretive man, disclose them and did not at the moment act upon them.

When the weekly San Francisco *Argonaut* began its long career on March 25, 1877, he was on the staff as associate editor, running a column called "Prattle," and editing the literary offerings of contributors. As has been previously noted, squibs about Sitting Bull and the armored treasure coach show that he did read the news from the Black Hills. Two stories published in the *Argonaut* indicate similar attentiveness. The title of "The Night Doings at Deadman's" (December 29, 1877) probably came from Deadman's Gulch, near Rockerville, a place getting much attention at the time.¹ In "The Famous Gilson Bequest" (October 26, 1878) are gulches, sluice boxes, pans, and a Territory, which could have been Dakota Territory.

But if he kept an eye on the Hills, he nevertheless carried on as if dedicated to journalism. For over two years he performed his duties regularly, having a fairly good time whacking in his column amateur poets, bores, snobs, thieves, and shysters, assisting in the publication of a hoax entitled *The Dance of Death*, guiding the literary aspirations of neophytes he looked upon as his pupils, and mixing in a slug-ging melee with the enraged husband of an actress.

About the middle of May, 1879, his column abruptly ceased, and subsequent evidence shows that he had given up journalism for mining. Letters to Bierce from O. C. Miller in New York in July and August mention the Carrie Steele mine, the necessity of purchasing a stamp mill for \$10,000, sales of stock, the firm of Limberger and Thalman,

¹ Said the Rapid City *Journal*, February 2, 1878: "There are lively times in Deadman's Gulch. But little territory remains unstaked, and work on the various claims goes steadily on, each miner firmly believing he has got the world by—100 per cent."

and a placer mine at Brandy City, a town that has apparently vanished. The fragmentary facts tell no coherent story. Bierce at least inspected the Carrie Steele, probably several times, but how far he went in the matter and whether or not he invested are not clear. At any rate, he did in some fashion get into the business. For the next eight or nine months his doings, mining or otherwise, are so vague as to be almost invisible. The Bierce career is clouded with vagueness. He was no diarist setting down a faithful record for the benefit of future biographers, and in his letters and conversation he could so well conceal his purposes that not even his friends always knew just what he was up to.

But sometime in the spring of 1880, when the Black Hills Placer Mining Company began to run into trouble, Bierce was somehow drawn into company affairs, although precisely how and when are obscure. An obvious inference is that Eaton, with the knowledge and acquiescence of McGinnis, made the first move. Dissatisfied with Captain West, he probably turned to his old war comrade as a likely replacement, both as man and technician. Perhaps Eaton relied upon his memories of the Chickamauga and Atlanta campaigns. On many a night in camp he may have looked on while Bierce, after a long day of topographical reconnaissance, drew in his notebook careful maps of roads, bridges, woods, and mountains—looked on, admiring the other's skill, chatting the while, and making more firm the friendly bond between them.

Be that as it may, Eaton, McGinnis, and Bierce reached an understanding that Bierce was to take over West's job at Rockerville. Probably General Shaler was a party to this understanding, for when, sometime in May, Bierce briefed himself by visiting a placer mine in North Bloomfield, California, the General was also there. Captain West may like-

wise have been present, since he was in California at the time recuperating from his nervous prostration. But later both Shaler and West behaved obstreperously, as if they either did not know of Bierce's appointment or chose to ignore it. Nevertheless, Bierce headed east in the belief that he had been hired to manage the Black Hills Company's business in Dakota.

On June 1, he was in Rapid City along with E. S. Kaufman, a relative of Bierce's good San Francisco friend, Charlie Kaufman. The *Journal* noted their arrival:

Mr. E. S. Kaufman, a representative of the well-known New York and San Francisco banking houses of Kaufman & Co., is now inspecting the mining camps of Pennington county, and is strongly inclined to establish a banking house here in Rapid City. He is accompanied by Mr. A. G. Bierce, famous both as a hydraulic expert and a literary man We understand Mr. B. is here under a permanent engagement as a superintendent of hydraulic mines.²

He was scarcely a hydraulic expert, but he did learn—and fast. Having a finger in Eddie Kaufman's banking scheme showed that, although not a confirmed dollar-chaser, Bierce, once he set out after gold, adopted the common custom of pursuit on more than one avenue. In San Francisco, Charlie Kaufman attempted to extract banking capital from such bonanza kings as Flood and Mackay, but they were reluctant to send their money so far from home. So that plan fizzled. It was just as well, for Bierce had all he could handle and more when he arrived at Rockerville about the middle of June.

Throughout the ensuing months of his tenure, he gave the Black Hills Company the best he had of physical energy

² Rapid City *Journal*, June 5, 1880.

and of thought—far more of both than the ineffectual organization deserved. If not a seasoned mine superintendent, he caught on swiftly, and he did learn by experience. Keeping always in view the objective of making these placers pay dividends, he time and again offered practical advice that was unheeded. Incorruptibly honest himself, he had to struggle against the handicaps imposed by the bungling and corruption preceding his debut. He was, besides, hampered and bullyragged by nagging officials and hangers-on, both in Rockerville and in New York. In the turmoil of interference and discord, this newspaper columnist was the best businessman and the best miner in the company. Against odds that seem insuperable, he finished the job of building the flume, and he started it operating on the gravel bars. Then he was sniped from the rear by one of those nagging officials.

Much of the chaotic story he tells himself in the portions of his letters that follow. That might make the narrative suspect on the score of one-sidedness and of possible withholding of uncomplimentary facts. Not even an honest man enjoys telling about himself the truths that hurt. At many points, however, supporting evidence confirms Bierce. Otherwise, the Bierce devotion to truth should absolve him of the suspicion of spinning merely an exaggerated yarn. That he did not suffer fools gladly is apparent. That his animosity colored his views of some colleagues is also evident, but he had good reason to dislike them. If, perchance, he failed to mention circumstances damaging to himself, it is hard to believe that the omissions were major. Since he had a good memory, and since he generally wrote while the facts were still recent and fresh, the impression is of a verbatim recording. The frankness of these letters, their true pitch and timbre, carry conviction.

A mix-up at the beginning of his career set the pattern

of derangement that was chronic thereafter. On June 18, a resolution of the company's Executive Committee appointed Major A. G. Bierce general agent of the company in Dakota. That the committee had not made all clear by confirming the appointment a month or more earlier, when Eaton and McGinnis had negotiated with Bierce, is but one of the freakish lapses for which this company was noted. Even the action of June 18 was futile. Marcus Walker was supposed to carry this document in person to General Shaler, Captain West, and Bierce at Rockerville, but "it was afterward not deemed imperative" that the "said Walker" should make the trip. So the resolution did not arrive in Dakota via emissary. Furthermore, by some strange oversight, nobody thought of sending copies by mail. Thus the mandate settled into the oblivion of things assumed to be so merely because they are on the books—like the Volstead Act, or a treaty of peace signed by decorated diplomats plotting mischief. The Rockerville trio heard nothing of this resolution. Hence, when Bierce took charge, as he thought, his anomalous position moved confusion closer to anarchy.

Captain West had not been formally fired, another strange omission of the Executive Committee. Still nominally in control, West was naturally resentful of this newcomer, whom he resisted, obstructed, and overrode. President Shaler was also on the scene. Having gone along on the Bierce inspection trip to the North Bloomfield mine, Shaler must have known about, and probably have assented to, the change of management. Yet at Rockerville he strongly backed up West, opposed Bierce, and liberally handed out instructions without any authority to direct affairs at the mine. McGinnis and Eaton relayed the wishes of the directors by letter and telegram; Marcus Walker and others relayed some of their own. Managers present and distant, of-

ficial and unofficial, played a crazy game of not letting the right hand know what the left hand doeth.

Precisely who was boss nobody knew, least of all Bierce. Pulled one way and hauled the other, he asked the home office to define his position, and, if he were supposed to be in charge, to give him authority to act. He had no contract, no formal statement of his appointment, and no fixed salary. Not until several weeks afterward did the Executive Committee get around to resolving that "... the compensation of the said Bierce . . . be left to the determination of the board of trustees . . . after consultation with Genl. Shaler, the President, and upon . . . further recommendation of the Executive Committee."³ This ponderous machinery moved so sluggishly that months later he was still asking what his salary was, and whether he might hope to get any.

A serious handicap to efficiency was the lack of co-operation among company officers. Instead of pulling together as a team, they pulled against each other in a lunatic division of authority that aggravated disorder. When they did get together long enough to agree on a resolution, Shaler or Walker or both might ignore it or circumvent it. Both gentlemen were more eager to gain power than to advance the prosperity of the company as a whole, and neither was above sowing dissension to achieve his end. In the home office, already infected with disharmony, embryo cliques forecast bad feeling. In addition, any officer or director might, whenever the impulse struck him, convey advice independently. The result at Rockerville was uncertainty for the new general agent, and a distracting "system" of stop-and-go and sudden change of direction. When he had been jolted for some weeks by such methods, Bierce said: "Shaler's

³ Copy of a Resolution passed at a meeting of the Executive Committee . . . 7th July, 1880. Letterbooks, I, n.p.



Courtesy Library of Congress

General Alexander Shaler



Private collection, Rapid City

Sluicing in Rockerville Gulch

remarks . . . about the necessity of 'one head' controlling are eminently wise—except insofar as he means his own head. This mine cannot be (no mine *can* be) successfully managed on any other plan The division of power is an evil”⁴ He repeated that wise observation a number of times, to no avail; the evil of division of power persisted to the end.

Evident at once was General Shaler's determined affection for Captain West despite plain indications of the Captain's incompetence and downright chicanery. Regardless, the General stuck closer than a brother, and those two and their New York sympathizers formed a bloc that battled with another rallying around McGinnis, Eaton, and Bierce. The conflict for mastery damaged both peace of mind and company welfare. Besieging the Rockerville base, subcontractors and workmen growled for their overdue pay, and tainting the air of the whole community was a sour distrust of the company generally.

These details describe behavior untouched by the shrewd horse sense that is popularly assumed to govern the actions of businessmen. On the contrary, the effort was unco-ordinated, fitful, and erratic. The people of this company galloped off so divergently that its elaborate organization was about as disorganized as it could well be. As advance notices had correctly surmised, the corporation had a good chance to be immensely profitable, but the opportunity dribbled away in futile conflict and willfulness—and fraud. The situation was the messiest that Ambrose Bierce, who had an unhappy attraction for messes, ever fell into. Yet, assuming that he was manager, he took hold vigorously.

His only assistant was Eddie Kaufman, who acted as secretary, bookkeeper, and general handy man. The com-

⁴ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 11, 1880. II, 119.

pany having neglected to provide for any such aid, Bierce paid the salary out of his own pocket. The new general agent plunged in up to his neck, made some topographical surveys, and got around to construction camps. The dam was unfinished, but it was due to be completed by the middle of July; the waters of Spring Creek flowed through six miles of flume. Work went ahead slowly, unpaid workmen being uninclined to hurry, raising the question of how long they would stay on the job without wages. A look at the company's accounts, kept by Captain West and his man Iddings, left with Bierce the not surprising conviction of something rotten somewhere.

The Captain was a continual obstructionist, his presence annoying, his opposition both stubborn and arrogant. But about the first of July, he was forcibly removed when Mrs. Sophia Hale had him arrested and clapped into jail on a charge of embezzlement of her company stock. Supposed to use it on company indebtedness, he had, she charged, appropriated it for himself. The *Deadwood Times* further alleged that "Capt. West . . . let contracts at double the figure the work could have been done for, and of course it is the natural presumption that he stood in with the profits."⁵ And he came close to being indicted for adultery by the Grand Jury, eleven of sixteen jurors being in favor.

The embezzlement trial was postponed when a physician testified by affidavit that the Captain was temporarily insane. Tried at Deadwood after several weeks of delay, the case was dismissed, the judge ruling that grounds for charges were inadequate. Bierce dissented— "... with West," he said, "the habit of lying is fixed and incurable. Hale means to have him arrested for perjury and if his testimony was such as Hale says it was he is undoubtedly guilty of it"⁶

⁵ June 25, 1880.

Some weeks later, when the Biercean talent for ferretting out undercover work had discovered pertinent facts, he submitted to McGinnis a blistering bill of accusations against the Captain:

I could (and should it become necessary I will) establish by overwhelming evidence the following propositions:

(1) Capt. West is a man of habitual falsehood and immoral life. (2) That the contract he got from this company was one of greater profit to him than a man who was a large stockholder and expected to be Superintendent had any moral right to secure. (3) That he sold a good deal of ground to the company as good ground that is absolutely worthless, and that he knows to be so. (4) That even had he obtained but a reasonable price for the work he contracted to do, the work was of needless and obviously needless magnitude and cost, in these respects, namely: The bed-rock dam should not have been built at all; it is wrongly placed, so as to greatly increase its cost. . . . The flume has double the capacity that it ought to have, and besides the extra cost it must be partially empty a great portion of even the best seasons, subject therefore to rapid deterioration; a system of simple and inexpensive log dams on the upper tributaries would have held surplus water and secured a more uniform supply of the same amount; there is for some miles of the line no conceivable necessity for a flume at all—it should have been a ditch, saving many thousand dollars in construction and repairs, and being in every respect superior, the character of the soil offering no difficulties whatever. . . . (5) That Capt. West could for the amount paid him for ground have bought large tracts of the richest gravel in the world, contiguous to Rockerville, nobly situated, easily supplied with water by a short extension of the present flume—sufficient to pay

⁶ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., August 2, 1880. I, 39.

splendid dividends for a great many years, the same land being now more difficult to acquire by reason of the hopes of water inspired by the flume. (6) Capt. West by his personal unpopularity and bad treatment of others rendered the acquisition of adverse or desirable claims impossible. (7) He grossly imposed upon the President of this company, and the President's family, by introducing a public harlot to their house, and lodging them in the house of a public harlot during their stay here. (8) He habitually neglected all his duties in connection with the work intrusted to him.

I hold myself ready, when necessary, to prove that in these several kinds of misconduct he was supported by Gen. Shaler, against repeated warnings and protestations of Gen. Shaler's friends. I hold myself ready to prove that Gen. Shaler would tolerate no suggestions, from officers or stockholders of this company, of any kind of mismanagement on the part of West and on many occasions resented the utterance of the most evident truths, respecting his incapacity.

Whether Capt. West obeyed or disobeyed his instructions obviously or violated his understandings with the Company, properly accounted for funds in his hands and advances made to him, and whether many of the foregoing charges against him, and against Shaler for earnestly supporting his policy, are true or false you know as well as I, and can as easily prove.⁷

Bierce might also have cited these facts: that although, by July 1, West had received from the treasurer \$118,836, well over half the contract price for the whole job, construction was by no means half-complete; that the company owed thousands of dollars in back wages, and an unknown amount on likewise delinquent debts for lumber, hauling, nails, and

⁷ *Ibid.*, August 8, 1880. I, 53-56.

other goods and services. As for General Shaler, if he shared the spoils, he covered his tracks well; yet supporting the Bierce inference of collusion was the General's aggressive devotion to this contractor of dubious integrity.

Not a little of all this was common knowledge, but it made no difference to some people. General Shaler was not alone in his bemused allegiance—if it was merely bemused. Undoubtedly, as Bierce said, West had incurred the animosity of subcontractors, laborers, and other creditors, but he was still ace-high with influential citizens. In court during his trial he had appeared feeble to the point of collapse, but upon dismissal of the case he miraculously recovered, and relaxed for several hours in a Sherman Street saloon. Then, like a St. George homeward bound after a session of dragon slaying, he triumphantly returned to Rapid City. The élite of the town celebrated his vindication with a huge reception; everybody who was anybody was there, sipping punch, nibbling food, and making congratulatory speeches. The *Journal* gave the affair almost a full column and editorially cheered the victory of truth and virtue.

Around this man West hovered an aura of the incredible. Against him was circumstantial evidence of gross dishonesty. Yet that did not lessen the esteem or temper the encomiums of the most respectable. How did he manage to preserve this extraordinary prestige? No doubt he was a man of some ability, and he must have had great personal appeal—when he chose to turn it on—that nullified damaging fact or inference. Perhaps people would not believe that a man of such winning manner could be capable of shady dealing. Perhaps he had one of those guileless, honest faces. Perhaps he was well intentioned and not inherently crooked, but merely a sporadic swindler whose palm itched intolerably only now and then, especially when it held a large

sum. Possibly he also arrived at devious ways by the well-beaten path of an expensive woman. As the *Deadwood Times* said: "Capt. West has been 'blowing in' his wealth and good name on this . . . Mrs. Carl [*sic*] . . . a very smooth looking young woman. . . . Just the kind . . . that a man of Capt. West's calibre would go broke on."⁸

Unruffled by a brush with the law, he came back to Rockerville more bumptious than before. He threw his weight around, called himself superintendent, used the company's letterheads whereon he was so designated, and contested the authority of Bierce—in these actions aided and abetted by the company president, General Shaler. On July 1, Treasurer Walker forwarded to West a draft for \$26,075. Why it should have been sent to him is inexplicable, considering the Executive Committee resolution of June 18 appointing Major Bierce as general agent authorized to take charge of company business, handle monies, and so forth. Logic and reason did not direct the affairs of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company.

⁸ June 25, 1880.

4. *A Hot Summer*

ON JULY 7, another resolution of the Executive Committee appointed Major A. G. Bierce "General Agent of this Company at the Company's property in Dakota, to take charge of all the Company's matters in Dakota." Either in a fit of absent-mindedness or out of a desire to convince themselves, the committee on the same day passed a second resolution that restated the appointment in almost identical terms, and added: "it is now deemed advisable that the said appointment of Major Bierce as General Agent of the Company be affirmed, and the same go into effect at once."¹ That statement hit the nail on the head—indeed, it was advisable. Major Bierce had deemed it advisable for some time. After three or four weeks on the job in an ambiguous position, he received official confirmation of his appointment.

The only catch was the neat joker in both these resolutions. Both created at Rockerville a Board of Advisement, composed of Shaler, Willsie, and Bierce, "to consider . . . and determine upon, all questions of every kind and nature

¹ Copy of a Resolution passed at a meeting of the Executive Committee . . . July 7, 1880. Letterbooks, I, n.p. This resolution also left Bierce's salary "to the determination of the board of trustees," etc., who never determined.

that may arise in Dakota." In any disagreement, "the decision of a majority shall be binding, it being, however, understood that all questions involving the expenditure of money shall be submitted to the home office . . . for the action of either the Executive Committee or the Trustees."² The board was also directed to appoint a secretary "to keep full and complete records of all the transactions." As another example of the company's disastrous habit of dividing authority, these resolutions gave with one hand, snatched back with the other. The Board of Advisement canceled out the appointment of a general agent and made the title empty. The principal results were more obstruction, more confusion, and more conflict. These Wall Street moguls were adept at thwarting their own best interests.

Bierce was irritated by this "cumbrous and uncertain" board device born of the ignorance of New York financiers. Too many directors' meetings, too much of curbing each other with cautious checks and balances prevented them from seeing that a mine operated best under the control of one man—provided, of course, that he was an honest man. Every mine he knew of, said Bierce, had a superintendent who was The Boss. Called upon every day for quick decisions—where to lay pipe, where to dig a ditch—he should not be required to delay work while a committee deliberated and a secretary scribbled. If three advisers had to consider "questions of every kind and nature," nobody could work much at anything except discussing, voting, and rescuing the secretary from a smothering mountain of minutes. Sometime later, after considerable experience with this board mechanism and other idiosyncrasies, Bierce wrote:

Before you gentlemen lose any more money playing at

² *Ibid.*

mining would it not be prudent to learn the business as it is done in mining countries where its methods are the outgrowth of years of experience. Under your present system you would assuredly not make a cent out of the richest mine in the world. Everybody is "boss," everybody the superior officer to the man at the mine . . . I cannot too often nor too earnestly urge on you to take all power from every *one* man except your Superintendent, and let *him* as much alone as you can. If he is a donkey or a rogue he will do you great mischief under this system; under your present one he can do you no good, however capable and honest.³

Perhaps the New Yorkers remembered that they had given a free hand to Captain West, who turned up in the donkey-rogue category. So now, in an excess of belated caution, the board-room gentlemen ironically imposed controls at the very moment they should have let alone so good a man as Bierce. Their action only intensified power politics and increased the number of contradictory orders.

The Bierce *status quo*, title notwithstanding, was practically *status quo ante*. His position might be officially recognized, but his authority was so circumscribed that he could not make a move or spend a dime without consultation; furthermore, neither Executive Committee resolution disposed of Captain West or provided a salary for the general agent. When Charlie Kaufman wrote from San Francisco, "Praised be the Lord God of Hosts that the consciousness of your virtue is not to be henceforward your only reward,"⁴ he did not know that on this job virtue was its own, and only, reward. General Shaler was still on deck issuing commands; in fact, from the home office came directives from

³ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 27, 1880. II, 187-88.

⁴ C. H. Kaufman to Bierce, July 23, 1880. I, n.p.

almost anybody who took a notion. The Board of Advise-ment was merely a little more of the same.

The board soon met in its first major engagement when company directors at long last resolved to remove Captain West. A general conference convened to draw up with West a new contract that would ease him out and get from him assets to set off against arrears of wages and other company indebtedness. Early in July, about a dozen interested persons converged upon the Overland House, in Deadwood, there to disagree violently over the terms of a new agreement.

The jawing and snarling went on for three days. One set of proposals after another was offered and contemptuously rejected, West's friends shielding him to the point of coddling. General Shaler, hotly defending his pet, attempted to force approval of his own recommendations without consulting Willsie and Bierce, whom he both ignored and insulted. The company's Deadwood attorney, B. G. Caulfield, followed the General's lead. Two factions lined up against each other: Willsie, Hiram Hale, John Rigby, and M. C. Thum, the banker, versus Shaler, West, Id-dings, Caulfield, and West's lawyer, Loring Gaffey. Bierce, attempting to break the deadlock, acted as compromiser, and he played the rôle well. To John McGinnis he wrote a vigorous account of the acrimonious affair. "Arriving in Deadwood on the 11th inst.," he said,

... I found matters in a pretty bad condition. Willsie Angered by Shaler's defeat of the arrangement proposed by himself . . . would make no further advances to Shaler, who, on his part, would have nothing to do with Willsie . . . I at once undertook to make peace, and during that day and the next visited the Overland House six or eight times. In good faith and good temper I tried every way I knew how in the first two or three interviews with Shaler,

Iddings and Caulfield to bring about an understanding, assuring Shaler . . . that Willsie was acting with my approval and by my advice—a statement received with indignation by Shaler, and derision by Caulfield. I offered also to have Willsie produce full and ample authority, and to do so myself, if Shaler would promise to meet and consult with us, in case our authority proved satisfactory. He would consent to nothing, and Caulfield berated the “intrusion” of Willsie and me, and my profession of authority, with contempt and derision as long as I would permit him. I reminded him that if he was “counsel of the company” it was unbecoming in him to ignore all the company excepting the president, for I really felt that, in the language of an eminent British statesman, I was entitled to at least as much consideration as the Ruler of the Universe might be expected to extend to a black beetle. All to no purpose . . .

Finding that nothing could be done with Shaler as long as Caulfield stuck to him I prepared in my memory, and at my next interview deliberately but with as much earnestness as I could command (and I *was* horribly in earnest) delivered a series of accusations against Shaler covering the whole time of his stay in the Hills. I charged him with devotion to West and treachery to the company—with deceit, cupidity and systematic falsehood—I charged him with endeavoring to keep from my knowledge and from yours various flagrant instances of West’s misdemeanors and mismanagement. I accused him of downright falsehood and mean innuendo to break *me* down, knowing at the same time my confidential relations with his confreres of the Executive Committee, and having received absolute proof of my trust in him and my fairness to West, and of my lack of personal ambition and fidelity to my instructions. He declared this last charge false, asserting that he had never written or uttered a word of me that was not true, and *then* (may God and Eaton forgive me!) I quoted from the latter—I am unfamiliar with the writings of the

former—to prove my assertions, and *did* prove them. . . . Well, the fellow lied, and lied, and lied to my face. He lied knowing he was lying and knowing I knew it. He lied for Caulfield's ears, to which ample organs all this was what it was intended to be—a revelation. It succeeded; the bond between this precious pair was broken at least temporarily—Caulfield, from self-interest, I think, visibly fell away from Shaler and after I had next morning threatened to convene Willsie and formally depose Caulfield that luminary advised his client . . . to a better behavior . . . I *do* know that they gave us no further trouble, and Caulfield did good service. Shaler henceforth accepted every invitation to agree with us, and was the meekest of men since Moses. Such he has since continued to be, though no doubt he considers himself a martyr. He probably fights yet in his N. Y. letters, but he is a subjugated commonwealth here. Willsie and I will continue to consult him under the Board of Advisers arrangement so long as you choose to continue that arrangement.

During one of my interviews with Shaler and Caulfield at the Overland West, hearing his honored name taken in vain, burst into the room with his head tied up in a rag, and looking like the lunatic he is, and began the most shocking imprecations of Willsie and pretty much everybody but Shaler. He was as picturesque in this attitude as ever you saw Booth on the stage. He was gently bundled out of the room, and five minutes later—after I had left—he was found, Caulfield told me, on the floor in an epileptic fit . . . O, it has been a sweet and lovely time up in Deadwood, believe me!

. . . I am not sorry I repressed Shaler with “the strong hand,” but *am* sorry it was necessary. I said to him: “You recognized neither my ability nor my power until I proved the one by making you feel the other.” And yet I fear this infatuated man is, till this hour, trying to save some small scrap of respectability for himself and success for his owner

from the hopeless shipwreck of that luckless mariner's venture.⁵

The Bierce skill with words lifted the recital of facts out of the ruck of the humdrum. If the company president were owned by West, he had attempted to compensate his owner by a spectacular performance: erupting in tantrums, refusing to consult with fellow board members, refusing to recognize their official status, trying to jam through his own demands, and, according to Bierce, lying like a Munchausen. An obscene display, but at that no more than an extreme variety of the aberration common to this company. The import of Shaler's behavior was that if he could not run the game to suit himself and make up the rules as he went along, he would not play.

The compromise agreement, dated July 13, deposed West on the mild grounds of his being "seriously ill and unable to give his personal supervision and time to the completion of said contract [of January 10]," and named an agent, Milton E. Pinney, a Deadwood merchant, "to carry on and complete the work." West's man, Iddings, was close-mouthed about the Captain's property, but the company took over all it could find: his house and furnishings, his office, the telephone line to Rapid City, all dam and flume materials either on the ground or ordered, and \$10,000 in cash.

In a critical proviso the company assumed responsibility for indebtedness incurred in its name by Captain West. Bierce and Willsie, after consultation with Shaler and an investigation hampered by Iddings' refusal to open his books, had erroneously concluded that these debts were negligible. The proviso nevertheless disturbed McGinnis, yet it is difficult to see how the company could have avoided liability in any event. Bierce, at least, believed that the company was

⁵ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., July 15-16, 1880. I, 6-14.

liable, and subsequent verdicts in lawsuits proved him correct. Unfortunately, the total indebtedness turned out to be so large that it eventually broke the back of the corporation.

Signers of this document, besides West and the three Board of Advisement members, were two physicians, who certified that Captain West had been at the time of signing and for seven hours before "in the full possession of his mental faculties."⁶ Bierce was not entirely satisfied with the contract—"not in all respects what I would have wished"—but neither was anybody else. Still, it appeared the best possible under the contentious circumstances. To the critical provision on indebtedness, however, he had willingly assented. "In consenting to the assumption by the Company," he said,

of Capt. West's present indebtedness for labor, materials etc. in the construction of the flume I was guided by a sense of justice to sub-contractor and laborers, and also of expediency. It seems to me right that these men should be paid for the work (the laborers especially having but an ill defined notion as a rule as to who is responsible for their pay) and there being but little doubt of their ability to enforce their demands by a Lien on the flume. Unless we pay the subcontractors the men will get nothing, and many of them are needy. The Company is locally unpopular already, and the denial of the men's wages would, I think, result in serious trouble and destruction of our property. It is hoped the securities, stock and other property, held by the Company may be ample to secure us from an embarrassing loss. I know that the arrangement with Capt. West and the inauguration of a new regime generally has restored confidence already here, and it will, I trust, result in time in materially enhancing the value of the 20,000 shares of stock held for our security.⁷

⁶ Miscellaneous Record, Pennington County, Dakota Territory.
Book B, 136-39.

Both the sense of justice and of expediency did credit to the Bierce intelligence. Less intelligent was the reliance on the security of twenty thousand shares. The certificates may have been pretty, but they were only a flimsy paper bulwark that possessed no real strength. Still, his confidence was genuine and appropriate; about a slight turn for the better he also said: ". . . the fact of my becoming a stockholder in the company since my examination of the property, has done something to inspire confidence here, as I have reason to know, for I have been so assured frequently . . . all is going pretty well—'considering.'"⁷

The general agent emerged sturdily from the turbulent Deadwood contest, conscious of having won a victory over Shaler, not only for himself, but also for those officers of the company, chiefly McGinnis and Eaton, who stood with him. Charlie Kaufman sent congratulations from San Francisco: "Thanks for your account of your . . . diplomacy and your triumph (your *veni-vidi-viciousness*) in reading which I was as Alexander swayed by Timotheus."⁸ Bierce needed the lift of some success, however slight. During a rough month of wondering just where he stood in this company, of fighting against odds, of being ignored, insulted, bypassed, and hamstrung, he had sometimes sunk into a pit of depression, as well he might. To Eaton he unburdened himself:

For the assurances contained in your various letters, of the goodwill of Col. Paine and other stockholders toward me, I am very grateful, and for the practical evidence of it which my appointment as General Agent gives me. Kindly assure them that whatever can be done to prove that I merit their confidence it will be my study to do so. Surely

⁷ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., July 15, 1880. I, 4-5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, July 20, 1880. I, 21.

⁹ C. H. Kaufman to Bierce, August 3, 1880. I, n.p.

no man ever had such splendid backing as I have had. There have been times, Sherb, when I should have thrown up everything and gone home in disgust (moods which I know were too well reflected in some of the petulant letters which you have so calmly endured) but for the knowledge that I had the best friends in the world whose interests such a course would have imperiled. There have been many times when I would have given five years of my life to have been well out of it; and even now, in the natural reaction and depression to which over-work is the only "sovereign remedy," I cannot help asking myself: If success is got at such a price, what would have been the cost of defeat?¹⁰

Loyalty and friendship were so precious to Bierce that he responded with the best part of his nature. He did not give of himself readily; he was not a "glad-hander" calling everybody friend. He put a man on probation, as it were, testing him out to find whether he merited friendship. Eaton had obviously met the test brilliantly long years before in the campaigns of Hazen's brigade. That "Sherb" is eloquent of unusual confidence and of a depth of feeling Bierce rarely expressed, and he confirmed it by signing himself "believe me your best friend." The letters to his old war comrade are the most whole-souled outpourings he ever wrote. If to an impartial observer the "splendid backing" in New York seems not so splendid as it should have been, both McGinnis and Eaton nevertheless repaid the Bierce trust by waging on his behalf hard battles on the home front. Evidently they had power in the Executive Committee, and for a time they were successful in bullying the members into support of Bierce policies.

If overwork were the sovereign remedy for the blues, he had it in the toilsome task of oiling up the whole ma-

¹⁰ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, July 18, 1880. I, 17-19.

chinery of company affairs. While the West rule crumbled, construction work came to a dead stop as men infuriated by months of unjust treatment walked off the job muttering threats of tearing the flume apart. "The men are practically masters of the situation," Bierce said, "so long as we are in their debt, and I doubt if many of them will go to work until they are paid another month's wages—that is to the 15th."¹¹ Receiving a draft for \$24,000 and two weeks later another for \$34,470, and adding to those sums the \$10,000 salvaged from Captain West, the general agent ended the wage drouth. "I was up all last night," he said, "and nearly all the night before, paying the men in one camp, driving to another and paying there. My last payments were made at 3 A. M.—in a bar room, to a crowd of men many of whom were drunk, and nearly all were sullen and menacing. In fact, I have not had a night's sleep since I went to Deadwood in the West matter."¹²

He lost more sleep when he had to turn out at any hour to wrestle with the unforeseen contingencies faced by every construction boss—as when a bull outfit loaded with iron pipe en route from Rapid City tumbled down an embankment. He investigated the chances of acquiring for the company valuable bars in Coulson Gulch, negotiated with John Rigby for property, and with Heuniche, Oliver, Piper, and others for extensive water rights on Spring Creek. Delving into the late dealings of Captain West, he twice asked McGinnis "to employ here a skilled and experienced detective. It is usual to do so, and I cannot help perceiving that there is a great fraud being practiced here which I have neither the power to prevent nor the skill and time to unearth . . . please instruct him to spare no man whom he finds guilty. I can lay

¹¹ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., July 16, 1880. I, 12.

¹² Bierce to S. B. Eaton, July 18, 1880. I, 17.

him on several tracks, I think."¹³ Not having a high opinion of the human race, he was so ready to suspect men of villainy that he sometimes built imaginary cases out of thin air, but this time he appeared to be right. Fraud had surely been practiced by somebody, or by several somebodies, and was perhaps being practiced still. Yet "The *regime* of wanton expenditure of this company's money is passed away," he wrote to McGinnis:

—forever, I hope—with all its representatives and apologists. I expect to unearth some damned crookedness somewhere before I get done with West's debts, and may have to send somebody to the penitentiary; but I fancy there will be no more of it henceforth, and hope you and the rest of the stockholders may soon be able to dismiss the subject from your minds. How it must have harassed you I can well understand. Never mind, we have a good property, and I mean to get some splendid dividends whenever I can get a few streams of water where I want them.

If I can push Pinney to push the work it ought to be all complete and in working order by September first. Be assured no effort will be spared by *me*. Then if we have water . . . we shall get *some* gold, I trust, this year.¹⁴

He did not get the detective he asked for, however, nor did he succeed in landing "the whole West gang in the penitentiary." Being himself honest, Bierce rated fraud and thievery among the most reprehensible vices. When his indignation boiled over at the discovery of cheats and liars, he talked as if he enjoyed nothing better than the pastime of throwing crooks into jail. But he was not really vindictive. Although he must have collected a packet of damning evidence against West and others, he made no charges against anybody.

¹³ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., August 6, 1880. I, 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1880. I, 31-33.

When he had exhausted daylight hours riding and trudging over the hilly terrain, he spent more hours at night catching up on his accounts. Submitting a bill of \$50.75 for the recent trip to Deadwood, he apologized for the size of it. "My first team gave out at Rapid," he said, "and was left there. Returning there I had to take a third for the first was still unable to travel; so, altogether, I had three teams on the trip, and had to pay for two all the time. The bills are pretty large, but I could not help it."¹⁵ Getting the cash for that journey had been a makeshift procedure. "I was out, and am still out, of money," he said:

borrowed \$105.00 of Willsie and paid him with "a check" drawn against the company's money; and the "currency" I borrowed from the safe. I don't like to do this, and hope the necessity will not again arise. It *was* a necessity. To prevent its recurrence I must beg that my salary and allowances may be determined as soon as possible.¹⁶

He might beg indefinitely, but he would never find out. From first to last he labored without salary or expense account, and he was always pressed for ready cash.

Besides the ledger work, he carried on a voluminous correspondence: writing formal reports to the home office, asking the North Bloomfield superintendent for a competent placer foreman, asking M. C. Thum to recommend a skilled accountant, penning to McGinnis and Eaton long, detailed letters. In many, marked "Personal," he editorialized upon the bare facts. These were admirable letters, the best he ever wrote, lucid and earnest, ingenious combinations of straight reporting and descriptive overtones, illuminating analyses of the issues one after another arising, and frequently sharp with Biercean edge—and all business. He was too much immersed

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, July 22, 1880. I, 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

in his job to insert chatty notes about people of the town, or about its social and other doings.

Rockerville was a source of plentiful news for Hills papers. The Fourth of July celebration achieved a riotous bedlam of carousing, fighting, and knifing. The erstwhile popular Captain West was prevented from serving as marshal, however, by the awkward circumstance of his being detained in jail. The arrest and trial of the Captain, his alleged speculations and insanity, and the change in company management were good items for reporters. And the long flume inspired continual wonder and hope, notwithstanding the cloudy uncertainty hanging over it. "Following the line of the great flume," said the *Rapid Journal*, "the traveler . . . will have pursued a . . . course, describing circles and semicircles, passing now and then over dizzy heights The completed part is supplied with a plank securely fastened on the caps as a foot plank" ¹⁷ The traveler was admonished not to gaze at the scenery, else he was likely to topple off the narrow foot plank into the water. "Rockerville," remarked the *Deadwood Times*, "is coming to the front rapidly as a great mining camp Yesterday a part of the 'gang' went down there, and soon after their departure five of the 'girls' shook the dust of Deadwood from their skirts and brought up the rear." ¹⁸

To matters of general interest Bierce gave no heed, at least not in his company letters. He was all business, and he had many things on his mind and hands. General Shaler, for one. He hung around, more subdued but still un-co-operative and annoyed by the rankling memory of having come off second best in the Deadwood conference. But he had ways of retaliation. To New York he dispatched venom by

¹⁷ July 24, 1880.

¹⁸ July 17, 1880.

mail: slurs against the Bierce character and business methods and condemnation of the West settlement, for which he held Bierce responsible. Shaler stirred up so much poisonous dust that some of it lodged in the eyes of the Executive Committee members. They forced McGinnis to ask Bierce for a "defense" of his and Willsie's course in the West affair. Bierce replied with a hint of stiffness:

This, I am sorry to be obliged to say, I have neither the time nor the will to do. Not being conscious of having done anything which has even the appearance of wrong I do not feel called on to make a defense. The duties of my position in this emergency require my whole time, day and night, and I deem it of greater importance to the Company that none of them be neglected than that I or any one be vindicated or justified. If Gen. Shaler has any defense to make I here repeat what I before urged—that he be given the fullest opportunity to make it. If he makes accusations against me which can not be answered out of my official letters and such private ones as you may in your discretion choose to submit, they will, I fear, have to go unanswered.

Pointing out that the new contract had been written by West's own lawyer, Loring Gaffey, and that it had been approved by Shaler, Caulfield, and Iddings, Bierce went on:

As to the liability of the company for Capt. West's indebtedness to subcontractors and laborers It was expedient to pay the men for their labor, and unless subcontractors were paid the men would get nothing. Moreover, it was just that the labor and materials that had gone into our property—under whatever mismanagement and extravagance—should be paid for. When a certain course of action is, in my judgment, expedient and just the question whether it can be legally enforced is not one that is

likely to influence my action—and on this proposition I am willing to stand or fall.

The agreement speaks for itself; if Gen. Shaler is dissatisfied with it, why did he assent to it? and if he, but for my opposition, would have secured a better one let him make it appear.¹⁹

In this home office flurry nobody appears to have remembered the function of that authorized device, the Board of Advisement, empowered to act by majority vote. It had so acted, Bierce and Willsie combining against Shaler. Yet here was the dissenting member—who happened to be company president—unwilling to abide by the result, discrediting the action attested by his own signature, and being listened to by the very committee that had created the board. Small wonder that such nonsense accelerated the onset of failure.

Also at Rockerville off and on was Captain West, the embodiment of outraged innocence. The attitude was not a pose. Genuinely believing himself to be the victim of persecution, he brooded darkly, also talked to anybody who would listen, about getting even. Possibly he may have been consoled by the beauteous Ida Karl, but the disappearance of her name from the news was a more likely indication that the Captain's fall was her cue to exit. In midsummer he faded away, to New York it was said, whither General Shaler followed shortly thereafter. "I confess I am glad that he is gone," said Bierce:

for he has lately done but little but object and dissent and decline to commit himself whenever his opinion was asked. There has been however no quarrel or exhibition of feeling; he Willsie and I have treated one another—as far as I

¹⁹ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., July 23, 1880. I, 25–28.

know—with civility and even apparent cordiality. In one interview with Shaler and Caulfield I said to Shaler all the unpleasant things that I had to say and never repeated them. The object of his going to New York I guess to be to set himself right and reinstate West. West delivered himself pretty fully on that point to several persons while here the other day and in Deadwood on the witness stand in his embezzlement case swore so Hale informs me that he was still Superintendent of this company and its authorized agent here. That he will make a desperate effort to show himself the victim of conspiracy and misrepresentation I do not doubt, and that Shaler will back him up is pretty certain. There is nothing of it. These two men will tell any falsehood that they *dare* tell . . .

The anxiety of the stockholders is natural; I hope to allay it and am assured by Mr. Willsie . . . that anything provided for in the contract can be done if not within the contract price at least considerably within that and the securities we hold. I am trying and I think Willsie is trying to save all of West's securities that we can—while he is going about saying we are thieves and—but really it does not much matter what he says. You did “make ample provision” for the building of our works certainly except in one respect. You did not provide a contractor of honesty and respectability . . . How under the sun you gentlemen in New York took such a man up I do not know. As for his “reinstatement” it is enough to say that he has been physically and mentally incapable for a long time, & has been guilty of dishonesty and misconduct over and over again all of which can be proved before a court of law by testimony absolutely unimpeachable.

. . . *Don't* be discouraged; I have not the least doubt of restoring things to a good shape and making our mine *pay*, and pay *well*.²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid.*, August 2, 1880. I, 38–41.

That some in New York flirted with the thought of reinstating Captain West testifies once more to his remarkable ability to survive detraction that should have been ruinous. Again, how did he bring it off, and for the bedazzlement this time, not of Rapid City bon ton, but of presumably smart New Yorkers? The man was a wizard. The pro-Westians, having been badly burned once, were sufficiently entranced to contemplate jumping into the fire a second time. Either that, or, having received a percentage of West's rakeoffs, did his supporters hope to cash in again? It is improper to raise such a question about any among so respectable a panel of directors and trustees, but the alternative is a wide-eyed naiveté unbecoming to a financier.

That the possibility of restoration should even be considered gave Bierce, along with McGinnis and Eaton, a hopeless sense of opposing forces blind and witless, yet crafty and powerful. If the general agent could cheer up the vice-president with a confident prediction, he often needed cheering himself throughout a harrowing summer that allowed him no rest. He was manager, paymaster, trouble shooter, and chore boy, assisted only by the faithful Eddie Kaufman, those two being the entire office staff of this supposedly ten-million-dollar company.

He did hire a skilled locator named John H. Jewett for the "delicate and responsible duties" of quietly spotting good ground Bierce hoped to get for the company; and he took on a messenger, the picturesque bandit hunter, Boone May. Having knocked off more outlaws than anybody else, May deserved his sanguine reputation. He was a good shot and quick on the trigger—too quick, some thought. When Curley Grimes was killed while in the custody of May and a deputy marshal, their explanation was that he had attempted to escape. This story aroused so much indignant skepticism

that Boone and the marshal stood trial for murder, the jury acquitting both defendants. That episode led the macabre Bierce to write the name on the payroll as "Boone May, murderer." He became much attached to this placid gunman, who calmly, without boast or swagger, went about his favorite occupation of potting road agents. If he would rather shoot somebody than not, all had to admit that his corpses were invariably those of undesirable citizens, never of the law-abiding. In the only narrative Bierce later wrote about the Hills, he told of riding with Boone from Deadwood on a rainy night, of an attempted holdup, and May's lightning-fast work with a Winchester that drilled the fellow full of holes.²¹ Bierce himself relished danger, and his great physical courage made him admire others who had it. During off-duty hours Boone was an unobtrusive companion around the office, but he was no help with the general agent's miscellaneous office duties.

A distracting quantity of matters called for Bierce attention, thought, and advice. Exasperated creditors dogged his steps, and incipient liens against the flume hovered over it. The First National Bank of Deadwood, repository of company funds, held out \$3,473.05 claimed against an overdraft of Captain West. Sophia Hale filed suit against Ichabod M. West and the Black Hills Placer Mining Company to recover \$32,500, the value of 6,500 shares of company stock.

On August 1, the day when the flume was supposed to have been handed over "in complete and perfect order," it was miles short of its goal, and there were grave doubts that it would ever reach Rockerville. Letters from New York brought disquieting hints that the company was near the bottom of the barrel for money. They also implied that some board members believed that affairs at Rockerville were

²¹ "A Sole Survivor," *The Collected Works*, I, 396-97.

fouled up, that Bierce was to blame, and that all work should be stopped to allow a thorough investigation. Such messages were miserable recompense for round-the-clock labors, performed with too little assistance and without one cent of salary to date. Around his head buzzed the angry noises of those demanding cash settlements he did not have the funds to make, and thus requiring continual tact and ingenuity to lessen their clamor. A creditor, he once said, is "One of a tribe of savages dwelling beyond the Financial Straits and dreaded for their desolating incursions." Buffeted as he was, he sometimes felt deserted and beaten. To McGinnis went a cry of distress:

Why do I hear nothing from Eaton at this time, when I so need his never-failing support and good advice? I feel as if every hand were against me here, and every back turned on me in New York. I have been *right* and *wise*, and whether time vindicates me or not shall never regret either the part I took in the settlement with West or the manner in which I am administering my trust. Yet I should like a word of encouragement from Sherb.

If I could be relieved of the duty of making further disbursements under this present arrangement it would, in my judgment, be to the advantage of the company, so many other matters demand the attention which I cannot give. No one man can do what I ought to do, and I am breaking down in the attempt. My single assistant is going out also. We get no rest, no sleep. The magnitude, complications and exactions of the situation it is impossible for you to conceive. Can you not, and *will* you not, help me somehow?²²

To that fervent appeal McGinnis could respond only with moral support, for at his end the struggles in the Execu-

²² Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., August 6, 1880. I, 45-46.

tive Committee and worry over company finances were breaking him down, too. He was a good man, like Bierce a better man than the company deserved, but those prolonged bouts of committee rough-and-tumble sapped his strength and shredded his nerves. General Shaler in person reinforced the opposition. Its attitude seemed to be that if the eminent president pooh-poohed charges against Captain West, then West was surely an honorable man innocent of wrongdoing. Apparently they could not entertain the suspicion that an officer and gentleman would condone fraud or descend to lying. If West were also in New York, as rumor said he was, his hypnotic presence must have bolstered the will to believe in Shaler's defense.

Still, the General did not succeed in reinstating the Captain, that madness being blocked by McGinnis and Eaton. This persistent pair also induced the Executive Committee to approve the agreement drawn up at that quarrelsome Deadwood conference. Among its other incidental business, the committee on August 11 passed this resolution: "that A. G. Bierce . . . be and is hereby appointed the Agent of the Company . . . and that a copy of these resolutions . . . authenticated by . . . the signatures of the President and Secretary, be filed and recorded in the office of the Secretary of the Territory of Dakota." By this time the files must have been well stocked with resolutions on the general agent. That appointment was the fourth: one in June, two in July, and one in August. Four should have been sufficient; yet this periodical jogging of memories did not noticeably amend the interfering tactics of the president, the secretary, the Executive Committee, or any stockholder moved by an impulse to put in his oar. Multiple resolutions did not improve the Bierce status, which at no time had any more stability than a leaf tossed by a high wind. General Shaler could offset

a resolution. He strove to alienate McGinnis and Eaton from their loyalty to Bierce, and upon the Bierce management poured more venom that poisoned other minds.

Asked once again to explain his actions in the West settlement, Bierce could only retell the story, including Shaler's part in it, and restate his reasons for his course. "This is the only official action of mine," he said,

that I know Gen. Shaler to now condemn, or believe him to We differed widely all along *in opinion* as to the character and policy of Capt. West, and if that is considered as constituting a test of ability or integrity I shall cheerfully respond to any challenge to prove the correctness of my views

As to Gen. Shaler's assertions of my "lack of business experience," he probably means business *capacity*, inasmuch as he can hardly know anything about my life; and he is welcome to his opinion as to that, his own business capacity being a factor in his judgment, and that being at least debatable.

My best defence is, I think, contained in my private letters to you and Eaton. Statements I venture to believe could be copied from them which subsequent events came as near verifying as they did some of General Shaler's, and which show a not altogether vague and unintelligent notion of this business and the situation of affairs here.

. . . if there are any definite charges formulated against me I shall be glad to have them transmitted to me for answer. I fully appreciate your kindness in suggesting the letters of explanation and vindication, and if I could think it to either my advantage or yours to do more than I have already done, until I know just how my actions are to be assailed, I would cheerfully do so.

The Company has made a bad blunder and bad blunders

in business have to be roundly paid for. The situation of affairs is mercilessly exacting and we must meet its demands. But let me here say that this if properly managed is not an enterprise of a day, but of a generation, maybe a century. It has had a bad start but it can have a splendid course. Let no man make the mistake of being disheartened now.²³

Not knowing how his actions would be assailed put him at a disadvantage. By the time the triweekly mails carried to New York a letter on one issue, attack might have shifted to another quarter. Yet despite his having reason to be the most disheartened man in the organization, he radiated hope in an optimistic echo of the company's report that had predicted a century of progress. Thus the general agent and the vice-president took turns boosting each other's morale. When Eaton broke his silence with cheering messages, Bierce was so grateful that he wrote long replies, commenting further on the insidious Shaler and reiterating his faith in ultimate success. "I have missed your letters sadly," he said:

You know me so much better than anybody, and understand me. I have been "hoeing a hard row," Sherb. McGinnis, though dissatisfied—much to my disappointment—with the new agreement with Capt. West, has supported me splendidly, but I think all have been under some misapprehensions and had misgivings—which as well as I could, and as fast, I have endeavored to remove

You say Shaler says Willsie and I are "already quarreling." This is a lie, pure and simple. Willsie and I have *never* had an unpleasant word, and never an important difference of opinion. I defer to his superior knowledge of affairs here from his longer connection with them, consult him

²³ *Ibid.*, August 8, 1880. I, 51-52, 56-58.

in all matters involving payments to sub-contractors and large payments generally, and he is in general charge of all the work of construction While I assume the responsibility for everything done in the matter of disbursements, we constantly consult, and have, so far, acted in perfect accord, as we shall doubtless continue to do until we find reason to distrust one another's judgment or motives.

Shaler's other assertion, that I said I had copies of his letters, is also untrue I *did* accuse him of falsehood and malice in his letters concerning me, and *did* give you as my authority. . . . I complained of the reproaches his misstatements had subjected me to I did not wish him to think—and gave him no reason to think—that you had sent me copies of his letters, I quoted not from *his* letters but from *yours*. He has invented the rest to make trouble between you and me Don't you believe in my bad faith, nor, so far as concerns our confidential relations, any indiscretion. My character has not altered since you saw me.

Another thing: If in any of my letters I write what reflects on the judgment or acts of you or McGinnis, please remember that I am imperfectly informed as to much that has been done in the past, and much that is now being done. I don't know whose notion this thing or that was, and Walker's letters are, it seems to me, unnecessarily dark. I have asked him to be more explicit. Of course there is no desire to censure or blame anybody. When I find myself unable to approve anything, or when I think a mistake has been made, I say so. You would, I think, hardly wish me to do otherwise, even if I knew *you* to be the man with whom I was at issue.

Believe in me, Sherb, and sustain me. A week here would make the wisdom of my policy clear to you I want *you* to see this mine; to study its relations of interdependence to this community; to ride with me over the many

square miles that our operations embrace; to see—as you could not help seeing, so obvious are they—the key points of the whole enterprise; to note [The remainder of this letter is missing.]²⁴

In his letters to Eaton, Bierce revealed himself with more unreserve than he ever did to any other correspondent. The admission that the other understood him is unique, also a remarkable tribute, for Bierce was not an easy man to understand. He never wrote such an admission to any other friend. Sherb, to his credit, did not abuse that regard or let his friend down—even though, like Walker, he sometimes absent-mindedly failed to pass on needed information. If Walker's letters were "unnecessarily dark," they were probably not so by intention, but merely by oversight or ambiguous expression. Not all the half-dozen or so officials writing independently to Bierce transmitted a full account of executive actions. The liaison system between New York and Rockerville was very poor. What the home office needed was a central news bureau managed by one of those superior female secretaries who know more about the business than the president, who file every scrap of information, who send out clear reports of all actions, and who never forget anything.

Minus such assistance, the Bierce knowledge of doings in New York was generally hazy. At that end, directors and trustees were equally hazy about the practical problems confronting Bierce at Rockerville. When provincial New Yorkers shuddered with pious horror over the employment of Boone May, gunman and killer, they demonstrated a vast ignorance of western life and country. The result of these misunderstandings was a jumble of cross-purposes and, in

²⁴ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, August 16, 1880. I, 59-63.

the board room, frightened dismay over the failure of rich profits to flow immediately into company coffers. To harmonize the effort and to restore faith, the general agent urged firsthand observation of the company's operations. Again he begged Eaton to come out to the Hills. "I implore you to come," he said:

Your clear eyes and clear head would be worth thousands of dollars to this company and to you. I want you to have a look at this ground. I want to lay before you my plans for making this a great and rich company—they are very simple. I want you to *see* the madness of stopping our work just as it is on the point of completion. I want you to perceive the necessity of gaining the good will and confidence of the men who make the local laws under which we must operate—to perceive that instead of controlling them—according to the West-Shaler theory—we are controlled by them. If a man could vote the number of his claims—as in some mining districts—we should be the masters; it is not so here, and they can do much as they please with our future—hamper, embarrass [*sic*] and thwart us.

I have never attempted to conceal from you my belief that the greatest value of our enterprise consists in the advantage it gives us in acquiring what we have not got. I want to show you what that is—the property of others that has been prospected to determine the value of ours—the placers of the "Prospectus." They lie under my eyes; I ride over them, walk over them, dream of them. They fascinate me, and their acquisition has become almost a "hobby" with me, though I have to appear not to covet them. I study to avoid extravagance in my official letters . . . and it is a relief to say all this to you. If I could see my policy adopted I would gladly accept the humblest position in the company, that would give me a living, and even leave its service altogether. But it requires money—money which

I had hoped to get out of our gulches, but which I now fear will never come at all.

. . . cannot the money to complete our work be some way raised? Will you all render your own stock worthless by refusing another paltry sum, and thereby render worthless, too, the West stock which would otherwise more than reimburse you? I will not believe in such a lack of nerve; it is only a lack of confidence in me. But if I renounce all control of the purse-strings, and take to the saddle, where I ought to be day and night, won't that make it all right? Don't let the Directors commit suicide in this unnatural way. Come and see what I have to show you; then go back and persuade them to a wiser course. If after being here three days you do not agree with me I pledge myself to resign. Don't fear the stage trip; I'll bring you up comfortably in a buggy from Sidney.²⁵

Bierce had caught the gold fever, a not surprising occurrence, for infection is easy. Angling for good claims and dreaming of rich gulches make him seem as flushed as Mark Twain piling up imaginary fortunes in Nevada. Yet he was less eager for gold on his own behalf than on that of this clumsy company, which was all thumbs and stumbling feet. What he called his "policy" was the simple plan of buying all the good claims in the district, but that hope was fading because of the directors' reluctance to invest more money in the works.

The strong invitation with its note about the buggy suggests that Eaton may have half-consented to visit the diggings. But company affairs and other business must have held him in New York, for he did not make the trip to Rockerville. Nevertheless, another gentleman did: the officious treasurer and corporation fussybudget, Marcus Walker.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, August 19, 1880. I, 66-68.

5. *Storm Before the Calm*

BIERCE welcomed the news of Walker's coming. He had repeatedly urged the presence of the treasurer to take over disbursements, not only to be relieved of a time-consuming job, but also, in the precarious state of company finances, to place responsibility where it belonged. "Walker," he said, "must relieve me of further duties in connection with money matters under the West contract even if I have to resign to make him do it. The thing has half killed me with work and anxiety, and I have not given satisfaction. I can swear that I have done the best I could, and show where every cent has gone; that is all I now hope to do."¹ Believing that the treasurer was coming out for no other reasons than to act as paymaster and to nose around in his own fidgety way, Bierce was unprepared for what followed.

Walker's visit produced new shocks and surprises that elaborated upon company methods of doing business by fits, starts, caprice, and afterthoughts—of which the bewildered general agent might or might not be informed, depending upon whether anybody considered that he needed to know. His knowledge was generally a jump or two behind the whimwhams of his New York superiors, to some of whom

¹ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, August 19, 1880. I, 65–66.

a mere general agent was himself a negligible afterthought. At times he was more in the dark than the office boy, and of as little consequence in the direction of events.

Only later did he discover the true motivation for this visit: that in New York the anti-Bierce insinuations had become vicious enough to convince many that he was a thief. Hence he did not know that the alarmed directors were sending Walker out as official inquisitor, yet without credentials or specific instructions, "for the reason," as Eaton belatedly explained, "that he understood our wishes so well we preferred to leave him to act as he might think best." Bierce was not aware, furthermore, that Walker was coming, not as an impartial investigator, but as a one-man judge and jury voting for a verdict of guilty before hearing the case and fully expecting to pounce on the necessary evidence. The talk had been as bad as that. Of all these circumstances the general agent was blissfully ignorant, but he was not long to remain in either ignorance or bliss.

When the treasurer arrived in Deadwood, accompanied by William H. Male, a trustee, Bierce was there to meet them and soon to meet his first surprise. Male arranged a meeting with L. L. Alexander, superintendent of the Father De Smet mine, and in the course of it blandly proposed that, since Alexander seemed likely to lose his job there, he should take charge at Rockerville. Bierce, who planned to hire a practical placer foreman rather than a high-priced mine superintendent, raised a figurative eyebrow. In the way of things in this mad outfit, the proposal was sprung on him without the slightest forewarning, without even the courtesy of asking his opinion as the company's agent, supposedly in charge. "I thought it odd," he said mildly, "but did not commit myself further than to say that any arrangement agreeable to the Directors or Executive Committee would of course have my assent."²

When they set out for Rockerville, Male remained behind, but in his stead came Charles A. Girdler, a stockholder with no official standing, but an expert at unofficial meddling. Throughout the ride he was gruff, curt, and cold. Bierce, puzzled by both his presence and his icy manner, got the answer some hours later in the growled explanation that he wanted to find out where his money had gone and where it was going now, his tone suggesting a belief that not a little of it had gone into the pockets of the general agent. "This was the first intimation I had had," said Bierce, "of his business in Rockerville. I presumed it was all right, but thought it, and still think it, discourteous in Mr. Walker not to have apprised me of it."³

Both visitors moved in with the air of a hangman who loves his work and has a job in prospect. As Bierce immediately sensed, they acted as if ready for the kill, as if convinced that they would turn up evidence to prove him a criminal. Arrogantly they pre-empted the office, ignored the general agent, and criticized freely: Boone May was offensive, also unnecessary; Eddie Kaufman was incompetent and grossly overpaid. They incurred the bitter enmity of John Jewett by haggling over a few days' wages. On payday they set up a table at which Walker presided, Girdler examining accounts and handing out money, Bierce doing nothing but signing checks all day. The pair "'ran' the office," he said, "deciding nearly all questions without reference to me, and frequently against my advice. I made no objection and manifested no impatience, although their unfamiliarity with my system and unacquaintance with matters generally seriously impeded work."⁴

² *Ibid.*, September 2, 1880. I, 73.

³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

During their stay he received from Eaton, but not from Walker, the tardy news that the treasurer was on the Board of Advisement, but whether as replacement or addition was not clear. Possibly that gave him a faint shadow of authority; Girdler had not even a shadow to justify his interference. Their highhandedness, incivility, and prejudging had no sort of sanction, yet all were typical of this company, in which, as Bierce had observed, "everybody is boss, everybody the superior officer to the man at the mine." The Board of Advisement, incidentally, slumbered somewhere in the records, having decided nothing since the departure of General Shaler. Self-appointed bosses like Girdler and Male interfered all the time, of course, as they were bound to, board or no board. Surely no corporation was ever more unhinged than this one, the Walker-Girdler episode being a choice example of the moonstruck.

With remarkable forbearance Bierce endured disregard and insult, patiently answered Walker's thousand and one questions, and promised hearty co-operation in any investigation they cared to make. The strain of keeping his temper must have been tremendous, for he was not a man to take slights and insults lying down. He was not one to submit meekly to discourtesy, shabby imposition, and above all to any arraignment, open or hinted, of his integrity. The growing pressure upon his self-restraint forecast an eruption, and after several days of nasty badgering he magnificently blew up. Walker touched off the explosion when, again ignoring Bierce, he summoned from Deadwood Male, Alexander, and an accountant named Chambers, whom Bierce had tried unsuccessfully to employ. "Well," said Bierce,

here was to be a pretty turn of events. Walker, Girdler, Male, Alexander, Chambers—all at once—and nobody had

had the civility to say, "By your leave, Major Bierce, we shall on such a day sit upon you so and so." Mr. Walker had once already practically informed me that I was a liar by saying I had exaggerated the difficulties and labor of my position, and once that I was a coward, because I had insisted on his presence while issuing to the laborers, obligations which I had no assurance there would be money to meet, and of a kind of which those very men held many which I could not pay, although nearly a month overdue—insisted that he, as Treasurer, should assure the men they would be paid. Mr. Male had said ditto to Mr. Walker's opinion about "exaggeration." (I think that just at this writing Mr. Walker has had good reason to modify that opinion; he hasn't found this office a couch of roses.) Mr. Girdler, as I told him to-day—though he denied it—had from the first assumed toward me the attitude of an officer of the law to a convicted thief.

All these days I had courted investigation and held my temper, for I saw that if I objected to *anything* it would be construed as an objection to an investigation. This last disregard of official and social courtesy I would not endure. I got "mad"—all over mad—and I should now despise myself if I had *not* got mad. Taking Mr. Willsie and Mr. Walker apart . . . I told him I would no longer be treated as a criminal, and that if he insisted on taking possession of my office without mentioning their intentions, and doing things by secret methods, I should demand their authority or close the office; that if I was not treated with respect I should stop all business, refuse to sign another check, and start for New York with my accounts and vouchers to submit them to the Executive Committee, in person. I told Mr. Walker that if he made any more innuendoes about my lack of courage I would demonstrate it then and there. I told him that his remarks on my "exaggeration" were, under the circumstances, impudent, and I would have no more of them or his secret methods—nor will I. In short,

I told him the wholesomest truths that probably he ever heard in all his life, and called him the "great white American question-asker," reminding him of the proverb that a fool can ask questions in a minute that a wise man cannot answer in a life time. I said (what I now repeat) that I had been required to perform impossibilities without the means of attempting them. He said my secretary was incompetent, which is not true, nor approximately true and that my payment to him of \$250.00 for last month's work was outrageous. It was simply *mean* of me to give him so little. . . . (Mr. Kaufman, by the way, is a gentleman . . . a thorough man of business who consented to serve me on my urgent solicitation, and without whom I could have done *nothing*. He has kept his accounts as I directed him to, until I could learn what books this same Mr. Walker required me to keep, get time to open them, and a man of ruler-and-red-ink to do that business. Mr. Kaufman does not "aspire" to be a mere book-keeper; he has had charge of the Company's money, made many of my payments in distant camps, and been worked literally half to death. I shall stand or fall with Mr. Kaufman.) He, Walker, objected to my employing Boone May . . . who on Tuesday last had guarded us and our coming from Rapid; whom I need almost daily to protect the company's property and claims, and carry important papers, and *shall* need to carry gold and guard it Mr. May . . . is employed by me as a messenger in a kind of service in which I have not the time to risk my own life instead of his. Every mining company has to employ such men, and detectives besides

Well, Walker and Girdler, of course, disclaimed any intention of being offensive or uncivil; but they apologized, all the same, and then I *invited* (verbally and by letter) Mr. Girdler to assist Mr. Walker in the investigation and promised him every assistance from myself and all under my orders Mr. Walker . . . confessed, as he had good reason, that my position here was not exactly a

bed of roses, and both he and Girdler have since treated me as if I were a human—very human—being. All the same, they are after my scalp, which they will undoubtedly get away with. Good enough—they are quite welcome.

I have told them to do anything they like in my office, and they may fill it with investigators of all sorts of kinds. But they have to treat me as a gentleman and an officer of this company as yet unconvicted of either incompetency or dishonesty. When I am no longer under fire you will receive my resignation of an office which seems to be without salary, and which no man can occupy without cutting his own throat. I've had enough of it.

I do not blame you or McGinnis—McGinnis I believe to have acted more handsomely than you, for he knows me less, and has, I think, had his confidence in me very much strained. You, I presume, have not, but you remember my promise in one of my long ago letters to step down and out when there was any lack of confidence among us three. That promise I shall fulfill, and God knows I shall breathe more freely when I am again free.

To show the animus of this thing. When I informed Mr. Girdler in Mr. Walker's presence that in the absence of instructions, or even a verbal request from Mr. Walker, I doubted my authority to permit him, Girdler to handle the company's money and assume official duties, he replied that he had decided beforehand *what to do in case of my refusal*. They had evidently contemplated such a possibility—perhaps thought it a probability—as my declining to be investigated at all; for I presume they thought their authority sufficient. What does it all mean? What has been reported in New York? Why have you kept me in the dark if anybody has been accusing me? I tell you these men came out here to, not investigate, but condemn.⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*, 74-84.

The long-overdue Bierce counterattack must have been one of his most telling. As a rule, he was a mild-mannered man, calm, civil, and soft-spoken. Even so, the sharp tongue that had earned him the sobriquet of "Bitter Bierce" made many believe that he was compact of spleen. Yet he was not spleenful even when reciting to a sinner the catalogue of his sins—as to General Shaler, for instance—and he rarely became "all over mad." When he did, he loosed a blistering barrage. Undoubtedly he blasted Walker and Girdler exactly as he said, and probably in other ways he forgot to mention. One of the most pronounced Bierce traits was that of releasing grievances, not behind the back, but face to face in frank words that called a man fool, damn fool, impertinent ass, boor, liar, hypocrite, or thief. Then, having spoken his piece, he subsided immediately into amenity, as if to say that no matter what a man was, he deserved politeness. The logic of this procedure puzzled many. Despising hypocrisy, he did not, like most of us, dissemble, but actually said what he thought, a practice so reasonable that it frightened thin-skinned human beings, who thereupon imagined him to be a fearful creature compounded of ogre and devil. But he was much too human to be either.

If the Walker-Girdler offensive was thrown back by the force of the Bierce wrath, it was about time. They had it coming. The unregenerate reader may even regret that Walker did not manage by some malapropos word to provoke a demonstration of Bierce courage and thus get himself solidly punched. When Bierce resigned, he could step out with the satisfying memory of having told two of the company's most harassing nuisances, Shaler and Walker, precisely what he thought of them. But as the conclusion of his letter suggests, such victories were Pyrrhic. They raised strange questions. Why were Walker and Girdler so certain

of finding evidence to condemn? Who was responsible for this "investigation"? Who had accused him of double-dealing? What scurvy machinations were afoot in New York? The record does not answer these questions, but a plausible surmise is that General Shaler was the principal villain. Bierce, being a good sleuth, probably learned the answers eventually, but he did not reveal the true story of vindictive undercover work.

If the knife were about to slit his official throat, he awaited it stoically and did not resign. Loyally, if grimly, he persevered while the eastern atmosphere became more murky, and the air at Rockerville foreboded hurricane. His telling Walker off had offended Willsie, who revered the great white American question-asker, and who thereupon turned to Bierce a very cold shoulder that impaired co-operation between them. Those underestimated debts of Captain West grew from four figures to five as the swarm of creditors became larger and more irritated. Bierce had at the moment no bank account to draw on, and in the office safe was \$4.15.

He had to retrench by a drastic reduction of his labor force, "although their wages," he said, "are not just the things in which I should have preferred to economize." Pay-day occurred with monotonous regularity, but nobody, including the general agent, got any hard money. Again resorting to a stopgap device, he paid off with postdated time checks—many of which were never redeemed—but he could not thus satisfy subcontractors and merchants. Two more creditors filed lawsuits. Yet, knowing the law's delay, he did not lose much sleep over suits. "There will be litigation," he said, "but I shall fight on every technicality and irregularity; and if I am not badly advised as to my power to delay, it will be a square year before most of the plaintiffs can

touch our pockets, which I hope will then have something in them.”⁶ Had he been allowed an opportunity to practice his delaying tactics, he might have saved the day. As events turned out, plaintiffs began within six months to touch company pockets, which did not, alas, have enough in them.

On behalf of the company he filed a suit of his own against the First National Bank of Deadwood to recover the \$3,473.05 held against West’s overdraft. For this action he retained Daniel McLaughlin, a Deadwood lawyer, “on the distinct understanding that he was to be made the company’s attorney” by the Executive Committee. Making himself the plaintiff was an error, as he discovered during the ensuing nine years of legal struggle, but it was another example of his devotion to a company that, on the whole, did not appreciate devotion and apparently did not even want it. When he went to Deadwood to consult McLaughlin, he had to borrow money for the trip. “. . . if I am to remain here,” he said, “I want my salary fixed, and to know how I stand—whether I shall have enough coming to me to bring my family here.”⁷ If he brought his family, he would have to borrow to get them there, just as he no doubt borrowed to send money back home now and then. Yet despite all that and Walker, too, he evidently preserved in a corner of his mind the thought of setting up shop as a permanent Rockerville citizen, along with wife and children.

Walker and Girdler remained in town, Girdler reducing himself to the role of onlooker while Walker busily, but now politely, investigated. To his surprise he found affairs in good order. “Walker and Girdler—perhaps Male—” said Bierce,

⁶ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 4, 1880. I, 93-94.

⁷ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 6, 1880. II, 104.

came to Rockerville (with whatever belief they may have started from New York) expecting to find a nest of thieves. Girdler took no pains to hide that expectation, but he takes good care now. I shall detest the fellow as long as I live. Walker was, I think, astonished to find in me and Mr. Kaufman, my secretary, two honest men. It is only to-day that, with Mr. Chambers, he went through all my accounts. Chambers, somewhat to my surprise, rather approved the manner in which they had been kept, and this afternoon Walker admitted in Male's presence that they balanced to a cent, and that the statements hastily furnished him from them were perfectly clear and all he wanted. The change in his manner since is marked and agreeable; he is not merely civil, as I compelled him to be; he is cordial and apologetic. I have had a long talk with him; he now confesses that he has not had the time to get much of an insight into our business. But bless my soul! how much he knew of it the first two or three days of his visit.⁸

That Walker was uninformed on mine business yet bossy about it was common in the Black Hills Company. The apologetic cordiality must have seemed sincere, for it lulled the Bierce apprehensions, and led him to remark: "He will now hardly venture to attack me, I think."

Walker had also taken charge of all disbursements, Bierce having insisted on that, his "strongest reason (as I explained to him) being," he said, "that he would be at liberty to repudiate my real and seeming obligations—for I had been compelled to be 'diplomatic.' . . . now circumstances have accomplished what my arguments could not, and I can and do say to all: 'You must see Mr. Walker; I have no power.'"⁹ Having turned over bank and currency balances,

⁸ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 5, 1880, II, 99-100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, September 4, 1880. I, 93.

he expected the treasurer to remain indefinitely. Walker also showed that he had modified his opinion about the difficulties of this job by bringing in as accountant this same Chambers whom Bierce had vainly tried to hire. "I make no objection," said he, "so long as he is useful. Walker means him as a spy, but that suits me, and the moment he doesn't please me out he goes."¹⁰

As for Walker's fellow traveler, Male, "well, Male is a very nice fellow, who merely has the misfortune to be owned by Walker, temporarily, or to have 'heard something' too. Girdler is no doubt deeply disappointed to find no evidence of stealing; it reduces his chances to be Superintendent of this mine."¹¹ Surface relations among the group were at least mannerly, often amiable, but Bierce wondered what lay beneath the surface. "Walker seems very friendly," he said,

but I suspect him of playing the hypocrite. That beast of a blackguard, Girdler, is sullen but civil, and keeps much out of my way, which he had better continue to do. Walker informed me that Girdler was here to see if things were all right and if so being a large stockholder he would advance money to help us out. Now, I suspect that all the stock he holds is the small block that he got for introducing West to his New York friends; and as for advancing money, it is thought here that he is pretty nearly flat broke. I have been inquiring today into his history (his character is obvious in his face and conversation) and it is not a good history at all. There is a man in Willsie's employ who knows all about him "from away back." He may be prejudiced but—I am too, I guess.¹²

That admission is engaging. He was indeed, like all

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, September 5, 1880. II, 102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹² Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 6, 1880. II, 104-105.

other men, prejudiced. Perhaps his prejudices were no stronger than most, but his strong language made them seem as casehardened as the bias of a Republican in a Democratic era. Once in a while, when the evidence showed him his error, he had been known to give up a prejudice. Toward Mr. Girdler, however, a change of attitude seemed unlikely. Around and around in the analytical Bierce mind revolved the provocative Walker-Girdler topic, what lay behind their initial malevolence, and what would come of it all. "You and McGinnis," he said to Eaton,

had Walker's character down "to a dot," and the hollow truce now existing between him and you, though I ardently wished for it, is, I fear, only a cloak for his designs against our whole "party." His manner, which before our "row" was equally indescribable and unmistakable, has altered for the better, and there will probably be no further trouble between us. It is to be regretted that he assumed it, and it was a great surprise and disappointment to me that he did. But I am glad I got angry and said what I did—inasmuch as I am willing to pay for the luxury with my official head. Shaler never made me angry, but this fellow with his smooth impudence and innuendoes was too much for me. It's ridiculous, but I can't help thinking of a certain passage in the First Part King Henry IV., Act I, Sc. III. It is all right, though, and if he acts like a gentleman, as he now knows he must, I'll embrace him—if he'll help us out by meanness. And he may kick me out in the bargain.

Your letters . . . received. You cannot know how encouraging they have proved—also McGinnis's—baited and badgered as I am by creditors, lawyers, warrants, piratical bankers, and investigators who seem to think I should have conducted this business solely with reference to their convenience in "looking into it." I wish it were in my power to conduct it in a way that would make everything at all

times clear. I also wish I were omniscient, omnipresent, infallible, and blessed with seventy-five or a hundred skilled accountants who needed no sleep. My accounts are all right—don't you worry; and I have done the best I knew how with the company's money. That I have been robbed some is almost certain, that I have made mistakes, and costly ones, I see—now, and am as much astonished that I ever *could* have made them as one always is. But I should have liked to see Marcus Walker in my shoes since July 13th—it would have been merry,—oh, very merry for him.

I am *very* sorry you can't come here. I know the storm that is brewing, and before I give way to it I should like to have you *see* and *know* how faithfully I have tried to do my duty. I shall never come to New York to explain or defend myself. I think you better stand from under—something is going to fall. It is I.¹³

The passage from *Henry IV*, which he mentioned with some embarrassment, is probably the King's speech that opens Scene three of Act I. To the rebellious Worcester, Northumberland, and Hotspur, Henry delivers a royal rebuke:

*"My blood hath been too cold and temperate,
Unapt to stir at these indignities,
And you have found me; for accordingly
You tread upon my patience. But be sure
I will from henceforth rather be myself,
Mighty and to be fear'd, than my condition;
Which hath been smooth as oil, soft as young down,
And therefore lost that title of respect
Which the proud soul ne'er pays but to the proud."*

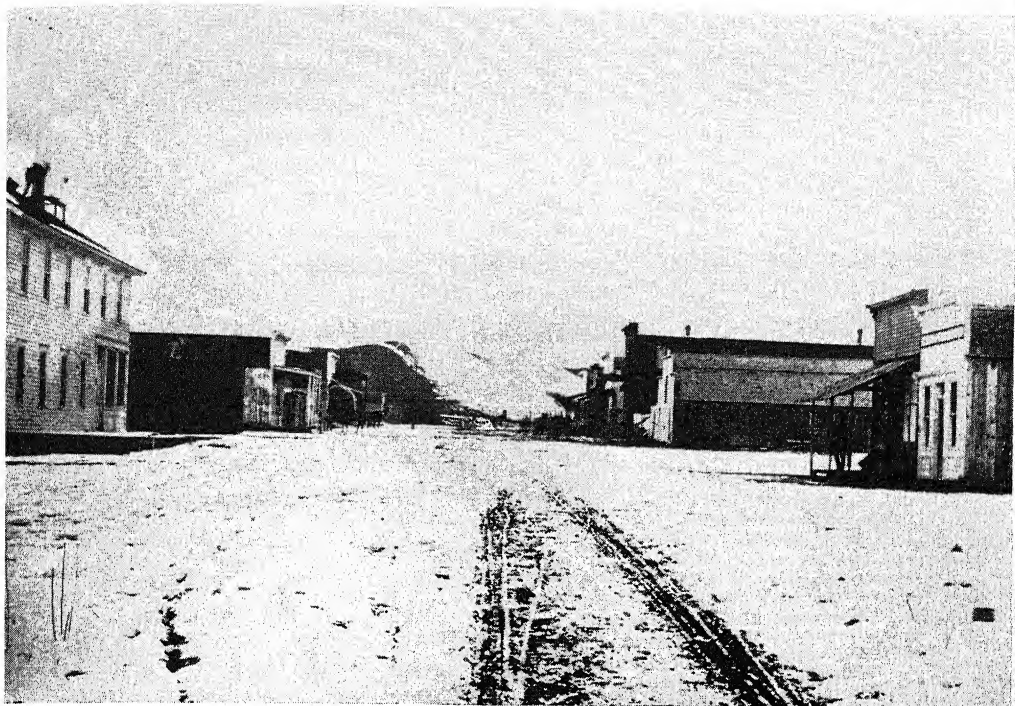
Proud Bierce certainly was, none prouder, and permitting from others no derogation injurious to his self-respect. He

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 4, 1880. I, 87-90.

could tolerate unfavorable opinions of his ability, and he could take with a smile the ordinary damning one man gives another in a fit of temper. The Bierceian treatment of personalities in his newspaper columns had brought him many a scurrilous reply. He had asked for that, and he enjoyed it. But he would not be treated as a rogue by anybody, nor would he, merely to keep his job, tamely swallow impudence and innuendo. A manner "smooth as oil, soft as young down" may appear inappropriate to Bierce behavior, but it is close to the mark. He was not a noisy person, never an arm-waving bellower, not even in those rare moments when he became "all over mad." Mr. Walker was probably told off in level tones, quiet and deliberate, but positive and intense.

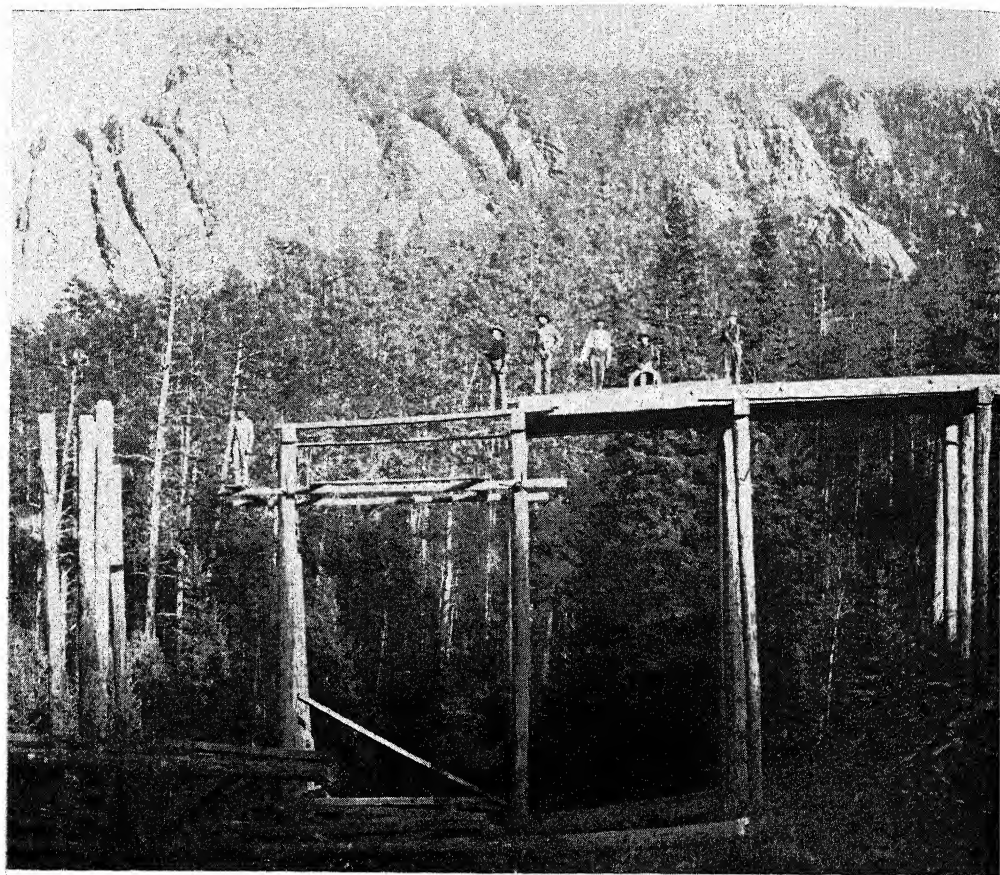
Faithfulness to duty was unquestionable. He was also tireless and determined, come hell, high water, or Marcus Walker, to finish what he had set out to do. Astoundingly enough, it began to look as if he would. By the middle of September the great flume was within a mile of Rockerville, inching along and due to reach its goal despite lawsuits involving \$36,000 and others on the way, warrants, disaffected laborers, work stoppages, continual interference from self-styled bosses, no salary, no adequate staff, and a company treasury running dry. The achievement was a miracle, accomplished by ingenuity and skillful handling of the politics of business. It has sometimes been said that Ambrose Bierce was not a good businessman; as general agent he was a superb man of affairs.¹⁴ Furthermore, with the ground of his tenure shaking beneath him, his company leaking and listing like a foundering ship, he yet believed in its eventual triumph. That, too, was a marvel, for he was not cut out to be an optimist. "Nobody in New York has, I am sure," he said,

¹⁴ I myself deprecated the Bierce business ability in my own book, *Ambrose Bierce, the Devil's Lexicographer*. I apologize and take it back.



Private collection, Rapid City

Winter in a Dakota mining town



Private collection, Rapid City

*Trestle for narrow gauge railroad near Sheridan, Black Hills,
showing construction similar to that of the Rockerville flume*

so perfect faith in the possible future of this enterprise as I, who have never written glowing reports of it. I knew we should pull through if we had the nerve, even if held—as I certainly believe we shall be held—for most of West's liabilities, whether we have agreed to pay them or not. I knew I could "stand off" creditors in the courts if they did not all pile on at once, that by temporizing, and partly paying some, and wholly paying others, we should gain time to complete the work; that if we *could* get our water in (unless we should have another terribly dry year) we should eventually make all our expenditures for West's debts, excessive as they were, seem trivial. (I did *not* know how little money you had in the treasury, nor fully understand the difficulty of raising more under the N. Y. laws.) I knew that things were not as bad with us as the drain on us made them seem. But how to make all this *felt* in New York—there was the rub. So I wrote little about it, keeping my disappointment to myself, and even risking your displeasure rather than attempt the impossible—a statement of "West's liabilities." Such a statement must be a mere conjecture, but it must contain disheartening figures—the more so from their incompleteness The large debts I have always intended to fight off since learning the magnitude of the total. I long ago determined not to *settle* with the subcontractors for Dam, Lumber, Pumping, Timber, etc., but *had* to keep them going Don't suppose for a moment that I have not been following a pretty clearly defined line of policy—about the only thing which *has* been clear in this hurly-burly that Mr. Walker thinks so simple and plain My policy may have been an unwise one—it will certainly be easy to make it seem so—but it has been pretty consistently pursued.

Just as every music teacher makes his pupil unlearn all he was taught by the preceding music teacher—just as every lawyer says of every document written by another lawyer that "it is loosely drawn"—just as every accountant thinks

another accountant's accounts confused—so Mr. Walker will find my business has been badly conducted. (I should not say this if he had not intimated that judgment before he had been in the Hills three days.) Well, you must give me a chance to make my own defence—that is all I ask. Don't judge me until I have been heard; then do as you like. I will have no fight over me. You have nothing to give that would be worth my acceptance or retention on that condition.¹⁵

His plan was excellent: soothing the more vociferous creditors with token payments, and by "diplomatizing" to keep all more or less quiet until the company had completed its works and begun to collect gold assets. That procedure was the most feasible for a hard-pressed debtor who had at his command only dribblets of cash. But the gloomy portents gave him little hope of carrying out his program. So far from winning hearty support in New York, his diplomacy appeared to meet only misunderstanding and suspicion. He pondered the possible upshot of Walker's investigation, and he pondered also, as he had many times before, the uncertainty of his position, which no Executive Committee resolutions or assurances from McGinnis and Eaton had ever made better than equivocal. "If these gentlemen [Walker and Male] have any fault to find with me," he said to Eaton,

I will answer their charges, and then quit if you and McGinnis think that course best for the company. But if they make no charges I must insist on my status being defined and assured so far as you can assure it. I don't propose to remain under fire very long, in a position which the circumstances of my own affairs have made peculiarly harassing and disagreeable, nor to hold that position by so insecure a tenure that I dare not send for my wife and babies. I know you will do all you can but you must do it

¹⁵ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 4, 1880. I, 91-95.

at once. Time presses, winter approaches and I mean to spend next winter with my family somewhere. *That* is the only thing that I am sure about.¹⁶

He talked as if he were a devoted family man, yet time and again he had walked out on the home folks for no other reason apparently than a need to escape. Yet his words were not insincere, for once away from his family he did miss them, and to his children he wrote affectionate letters. Bierce was in the devilish position of being discontented both with and without his wife and babies.

The Rockerville trio was a family of a sort. After several friendly talks with Walker, Bierce said that he "seemed to approve of my whole work here, as far as he knew." But just when they were settling down to a placid existence, the unpredictable treasurer packed up and pushed off for New York, brushing aside the protests of Bierce, who reminded him of his promise to remain as paymaster. "Well, does it not confirm what I wrote; that everything he does is a 'surprise'; that he will do nothing openly and manly?"¹⁷ Bierce said that because Walker's hurried departure instantly revived his suspicion that Walker intended no favorable report at the other end. "No, sir, if Walker had heard nothing against me in New York or on the way, and had not any personal end to gain by breaking me, why, his action is to me unaccountable and I give it up."¹⁸ His suspicion was justified. Walker, hoping to rise to power by outmaneuvering the McGinnis-Eaton-Bierce party, left so fast because he could not wait another minute to get back to the board room with a satchel full of trumped-up charges and a soul full of meanness.

¹⁶ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 6, 1880. II, 105-106.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 5, 1880. II, 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

6. *Act Three*

WALKER and Male were scarcely on their way, leaving Girdler on the premises, before another coterie came tramping in: Caulfield, the lawyer, Alexander, the Father De Smet superintendent, and F. A. Babcock, superintendent of the Rhoderick Dhu, Captain West's old crony, and the man who had written that influential letter to John McGinnis about a year before. Why they had all traipsed down to Rockerville, Bierce did not know, but their cordiality announced that at any rate they were not inquisitorial investigators bent on proving him a thief. Everybody oozed the oily cheer that lubricates the crafty purpose. All went merry as a marriage bell. Yet two mine superintendents in the company of Caulfield, whom Bierce distrusted, and all three chummy with "that beast of a black-guard, Girdler," made him wary.

When Alexander said that he had come at Male's request to look over company property, Bierce, being chattily noncommittal, took him for a morning's hike over the property and tried vainly to steer him away from the rich diggings in Coulson Gulch and Mineral Hill. The whole crowd looked around, legging across Spring Creek, where Babcock owned claims, inspecting the Bonanza Bar, and exploring

Ohio Gulch. The purpose was, they implied, to negotiate for property on behalf of the company. "I gathered from Girdler's remarks," said Bierce, "that he had bonded it with a view to purchasing for the company, but he did not directly say so."¹

If he had, well and good; if the others intended to serve company interests as they said, splendid. But the keen Bierce nose smelled something fishy. If Girdler was flat broke, he was unlikely to bond anything. The Babcock-Caulfield combination looked like a faction which would be the natural ally of the Shaler-Walker bloc. Another adherent was Willsie, who declared himself to be a "Walker man" who "meant to stand or fall with him." The coalition seemed to Bierce adverse to company interests, and certainly opposed to what he called his "party" of McGinnis, Eaton, and himself. Events proved his assumptions very nearly correct, wrong only in this: that Walker, in his drive for control, would not scruple to sabotage any ally. At any rate, Bierce rightly surmised that the struggle for power boded no good to the company as a whole.

As for Alexander, he was considering the Rockerville superintendency, offers having been made to several candidates without the advice or even the knowledge of the general agent. "I know—learned to-day—," he said,

that the management of this mine has been offered to several persons in Deadwood, among others Mr. L. L. Alexander It was offered, also, to Mr. Babcock, who seems to have gone so far toward acceptance as to try to engage Chambers for his secretary, but Chambers did not accept the position. In short, since the arrival in the Hills of Walker, Male and Girdler, the management of this mine has been "in the market."

¹ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 9, 1880. II, 108. To bond a mine is to take an option on it by a down payment

I judge that the scheme includes a consolidation of our interests with those of the Caulfield-Babcock party. Now these gentlemen neither have any money nor any ground that is worth a dollar to us. The only ground they ever did have that we wanted I jumped, and shall hold in spite of anything.²

How Bierce jumped claims he did not say. The usual method in Rockerville was first to learn, by careful spying, whether an owner were honestly putting in on a claim his required one day's work a week, not merely turning over the earth on an old pile. If that was the extent of his labor, the claim jumper could move in and "hold in spite of anything." Perhaps that method was Bierce's, too; at least it seems congenial to his talent for discovering what was what.

Apropos of the management's being in the market, "Jewett tells me," he said, "that the offer by Walker of the superintendency of this mine to several persons . . . had made quite a panic in Deadwood and Central, and everybody thought we were 'busted.' As everybody seems to think so about once a month this is not of much importance perhaps."³ The general opinion was not far wrong. For if the company were not "busted" precisely, it was in great distress. To fatten a shrunken treasury, Mr. Tillinghast, one of the trustees, proposed that \$15,000 be raised by voluntary contributions. When he sounded out company officers, Marcus Walker dodged neatly in a side-stepping telegram: "Cannot say what might contribute. Am troubled concerning present management here. Changes must be made or everything should be shut down."⁴ Bierce found out about that wire from a friendly telegraph operator in Rapid City.

² Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 14, 1880. II, 133.

³ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 15, 1880. II, 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

It is a good example of his ingenuity at getting information; if kept in the dark, he generally managed to throw light into it. The relief fund did not materialize, but that was no great loss, for a mere fifteen thousand would have been only a minute drop in a very large bucket. To the general agent, money troubles were as familiar as bosom friends.

His three visitors soon departed, exuding amity, and shortly thereafter Babcock went on to New York—"to get my place," said Bierce. "Really, the enemy is getting audacious."⁵ Resuming the normal tumult of duties, he took on again the job Walker had agreed to handle, disbursing funds, if any. The office safe was flush with nineteen dollars, but the bank account was dubious. "Although Walker," he said, "has managed to leave me without money or credit, I am trying very hard to get our shrunken stream of water on to a rich body of gravel for a few weeks, in order to produce a better feeling in New York."⁶ The feeling in the Hills needed bettering too. One paper remarked: "Fears are entertained by many of the employes of the Rockerville flume company that they will not be able to get pay for the work they have performed."⁷ So confirmed were these fears that many a disgusted workman angrily sold his time checks at a discount and left town, the exodus causing a noticeable drop in population.

Dorr Heffelman and Dougherty and Company filed mechanic's liens against the flume; G. Schnasse filed suit against the company. That sort of thing had become so common that the general agent did not even bother to look up. Indeed, as he surveyed the problematical future, he concluded that, if kicked out, he would be damned if he waited around as a material witness while counsel cross-examined

⁵ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 18, 1880. II, 150.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Yankton *Daily Press and Dakotian*, September 15, 1880.

and judges overruled through a weary eternity of hearings. "If there is 'a change in the management,' " he said to Eaton,

you would hardly expect me to remain in the Hills to spend my time in unprofitable and disagreeable wrangles with "plaintiffs' attorneys"—to be baited and bull-dozed by mining camp lawyers, and have my character at the mercy of mining camp witnesses and affidavit brokers, and mining camp newspapers.

You know my fear of "territorial courts and mining camp intrigues" was the reason I declined to give bonds. I was willing to put my liberty and reputation at their mercy, in your service, but not the property of my friends. But ought I to continue to do so in the service of a company that has done me what I consider a grievous injustice? Bluntly, I *won't*. Would you?⁸

That "eternal 'if,' " as he put it, loomed larger when he learned—but not until a week after Walker's departure—that the treasurer had come to Rockerville at the behest of the directors, yet without either formal credentials or instructions. Having had no notice of these circumstances, Bierce was justly indignant. "Now with all due deference to the Directors," he said,

I must say this seems to me most unusual and surprising. Granted, willingly, that Mr. Walker might know the Directors' wishes, how was *I* to know that he knew them, or possessed plenary powers, unless I was myself apprised of the fact? It is not within my observation (which with regard to such matters has not been small) that the Secretary of a mining company assumes, or can be supposed to assume, any duties or authority at the mine except such as have been distinctly conferred upon him in writing, in

⁸ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 17, 1880. II, 145.

order that the Superintendent or other officer in charge there may know the extent of his own authority and power. I am not aware of having disregarded the wishes of Mr. Walker in any important particular, but I certainly complied with them as wishes only, not as commands, for he brought with him no evidence that our relations had been temporarily reversed, and that he was, in Dakota, my superior officer.

Quoting the Executive Committee resolution of July 7, "Resolved that Major A. G. Bierce be, and hereby is, appointed General Agent," etc., he went on:

I think I am not far wrong in assuming that if the authority so conferred upon me is to be even temporarily suspended I should be apprised of the fact, not by the person assuming it, verbally, but by notification by the body that conferred it. If this is not a principle of law (of which you are a better judge than I) it is at least a custom of business and a dictum of reason.⁹

Since dicta of reason had never played prominent roles in the delirium of this company, they were unlikely to do so now. Along with the afterthought information about Walker, Bierce received, by way of an assistant secretary, "some elaborate instructions from the President to the Secretary & Treasurer concerning the manner of going to work on the Black Hawk Location, how to handle the water, how to place the tail-sluiques, etc. It certainly seems to me unusual for the President at the home office to direct the Secretary how to perform the duties of the General Agent at the mines."¹⁰ Such a vagary might be unusual in a normal company, but not in an organization as daft as this one. The

⁹ *Ibid.*, September 14, 1880. II, 125-27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

Rockerville dementia was so well known to the district that the *Rapid City Journal* offhandedly observed: "... the management of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company's affairs undergoes its usual state of chronic change."¹¹ Bierce's restrained conclusion was that "the events of the last few weeks ... have not tended to give me a very clear idea of my relations to the company, and of my duties and their limitations."¹² That was putting it mildly; he might as truly have said few months as few weeks.

Meanwhile, in New York, the Walker attack speeded up with denunciations of the Bierce character, of his inefficient management, and of his overpaid employees—and with incidental assaults upon Bierce supporters, McGinnis and Eaton. Having talked much and "politicked" more, the treasurer climaxed his campaign by preparing for the directors a formal catalogue of complaints against the general agent. Bierce telegraphed: "Postpone action until I am heard. Important statements on the way," and wrote: "It seems to have been well devised, this little game. Still, I must insist and re-insist on a hearing. Don't let considerations of friendship get mixed up in this; judge me on my merits as I may be able to make them appear."¹³

This latest piece of low trickery must have plunged him into bitterness, if so many other thwartings and setbacks had not exhausted his capacity for bitterness. He had the wry memory of having been deluded by Walker's cordiality at the end of his Rockerville visit and of his hearty approval of the conduct of affairs, both seeming to forecast a most favorable report. Yet now this hypocrite had struck, less honorably than a rattlesnake, without warning, without in-

¹¹ September 18, 1880.

¹² Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 14, 1880. II, 128.

¹³ *Ibid.*, September 15, 1880. II, 140-41.

tention of allowing the victim a hearing. This was railroad-ing, à la star chamber business, brass knucks in a velvet glove—in short, dirty. Yet Bierce did not intend to go down meekly. The job itself he could bid good-bye without regret, but he would not permit his honor or his superhuman efforts to be impugned without rebuttal. "I certainly do not propose," he said to McGinnis,

to submit to Walker's intrigues and falsehoods without giving you and Eaton a chance to justify me and your own judgment. Considering all that Shaler has done, and that he is to-day President of the Company, I think I have a right to at least a hearing, and this I demand. It is pretty hard, you will admit, that after working all this time at the most disagreeable and thankless duties that could have been required of me, now, just as the time comes for me to begin a more pleasing kind of duties, a kind to make directors and stockholders smile instead of frown, I am compelled to defend myself against the intrigues of such a man as Walker, who came out here with everything cut-and-dried for my overthrow . . .

Eaton writes me that perhaps the control of the enterprise *may* fall into the hands of Walker. It looks like it, certainly—it looks as if it had already done so. The reason of Eaton's apprehension is not very creditable to the rest of you—namely, that Walker is the only man who can afford to devote his time to managing affairs at that end. There is not one of you, on the contrary, who can afford *not* to do so. It is a good mine, and can be made a great one. It is not the scheme of a year, but of a century. If you and Eaton let go, or have already let go, your hold on its control you will, I am sure, bitterly regret it, for it will fall into the hands of Walker, who has neither brains, nor honesty, nor truth. So far from abandoning it you ought—

one of you—to come here at once and see for yourselves. You send Shaler!! You send Walker!!! But you won't come yourselves. Are sense and honesty to rely on the reports of incapables and rogues? This is all wrong; it is unjust to yourselves and to me. In your last letter you express your gratitude to me and say that money cannot repay me. Then keep your money and repay me by coming here or sending Eaton. *That* would repay me.¹⁴

If few had time for affairs at the New York end, perhaps one reason was that so many spent so much time obstructing affairs at Rockerville. The excuse is another curious comment on the strange behavior of this company. The easterners appear to have regarded their ten-million-dollar corporation as an entertaining toy, which, once wound up, would spin thereafter without more than sporadic attention. The confusion resulting from that point of view had been glaring from the outset. Considering the thousands of dollars sunk at Rockerville, the layman ignorant of high finance may wonder, as Bierce did, what made them believe they could *not* afford the time. The statement must have been a facer for the general agent, who had most earnestly devoted *his* time—all of it. He did not succeed in inducing either of his good friends to visit the diggings, perhaps he did not expect to succeed in a forlorn gesture that preceded the beginning of the end. The illness of John McGinnis forced his temporary retirement from the New York arena; furthermore, Eaton's dogged letters conveyed the impression that both were weary of the struggle. "I sincerely hope you will have recovered before this is received," wrote Bierce to the vice-president:

If not I must beg you not to worry yourself with this new complication resulting from the Walker conspiracy—for

¹⁴ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., September 14, 1880. II, 132-34.

conspiracy it certainly is. It is only *through* me that Walker is attacking *you* and *Eaton*; and if you two are tired of the control there—as I infer from Eaton’s letters—I shall willingly surrender it here; all the more willingly because my position here has not been what you had hoped to be able to give me. Practically, my powers have been very limited And now it appears that I am under the control of the Secretary whenever he may choose to exercise plenary powers, and that the President also may direct the work here. Altogether, I fear it will be impossible to go on this way any longer, and when I am cleared of Walker’s lying accusations and intrigues I am ready to quit, if you are.¹⁵

For the nonce, however, the general agent carried on as if he expected to remain for years, overseeing the laying of pipe into Pheasant Gulch, courting the favor of the miffed Willsie, and tidying up his accounts for transmission to the treasurer. “Walker’s man Chambers,” he said,

has found my accounts not only straight but thoroughly well kept, notwithstanding the cumbrous and involved system to which I succeeded, and which I did not care to change, except little by little as I could receive Pinney’s assent—say about one reform per day. At least Chambers has frequently expressed himself to the above effect, and “wondered how we could have done it.”

I want you to examine these statements taken easily and rapidly from my books and papers, the time consumed in getting up the statements being mostly spent by Chambers in examining our vouchers, which he has found right as a trivet for every cent.

I confess I am rather proud of all this, and you would be so too if you could have any adequate conception of the circumstances under which the feat was accomplished. My

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, September 18, 1880. II, 148-50.

system of doing business and keeping accounts may have been a mining-camp system, rather than a Wall Street one, but it has enabled me to know and *show* where every dollar entrusted to my care has gone.

I want you to observe, too, that my office expenses have been light. I think they show a tendency to economy, and if you know any large mine that can make a better showing in that respect, or one half so good, just mention the name of it. I have economised wherever I could—have not even had a servant to sweep out the office and make up my bed—partly to enable me to pay an “outrageous” sum to my secretary—who “had no system” and was “incompetent” and to keep a messenger who has the demerit of having a good deal of robbers’ blood on his hands, the smell whereof was disagreeable to the fastidious New York nose—Walker’s nose and the proboscis of the dainty Girdler.

No, sir, I *won’t* let up on ’em; what I write to you can’t hurt them, and it’s a blessed relief to me. When Walker goes back to counter-jumping—I *know* he was educated as a dry-goods-and-groceries clerk—and has reformed his past participles I’ll call off my dog. Till then I’m not his’n, but yours ever¹⁶

He gave serious thought to the crucial subject of water, without which a rich claim was just so much inert rock and reddish earth. When and if the company brought its water down to Rockerville Gulch, claim owners expected to lease it cheaply. The Bierce plan, however, was not to lease, but to force owners to sell to the company parcels of good ground that were useless without water. It was a tough plan, rather ruthless, unlikely to make him popular with claim owners, but it was certainly hardheaded business. He suspected that Babcock, among his other lobbyists in New

¹⁶ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 13, 1880. II, 122–24.

York, might try to wangle a lease for his claims on Spring Creek. "Now this is not advisable," said Bierce:

No man can say how much he can afford to pay, for no man can tell how much water we may have, how much he can get for it, nor, in short, anything about it. I tried for weeks to learn how much the miners in Rockerville Gulch would pay, but they were vague as possible. Nobody in the district has ever handled on his ground any considerable amount of water, or knows what he could do with it. Babcock and his associates have no money, and no *responsible* persons are likely to give the necessary bonds, or could probably be compelled to pay if Babcock should fail. It is a scheme—if he has such—that is uncertain and hazardous no end. The ground they must have, to do anything, is ground that we need and must some day own. We will never get it if our water once goes on it. There are millions of dollars in it, but it must be worked by the owners, according to a comprehensive system which only the company owning both ground and water can devise and successfully carry out. I advise you to look with great suspicion on any proposition looking to a lease of our water, and on any proposition coming from a visionary like Babcock, with his backing of impecunious "prospectors," the success of every one of whose interests depends on their relation to our property. You can't make a mistake in opposing any innocent-looking scheme of the Babcock-Caulfield party.¹⁷

Babcock, said Bierce, "was at such pains to explain why he was going [to New York] that I suspect he has a scheme for the control of this mine." The record does not reveal the Babcock-Caulfield manipulations, but Bierce was probably as correct in this suspicion as he had been in other guesses. Undoubtedly a good deal of jockeying for position was

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 23, 1880. II, 158-59.

going on in New York, the rider in the lead at the moment being Mr. Walker, who would not hesitate to run over the Babcock-Caulfield combination or any other. Whatever the maneuvering, Bierce well knew that a realignment of forces meant curtains for him.

Nevertheless, he plodded on, talking about "our property" and "our interests" as if he had unnumbered days ahead. For the third time he asked for a detective (whom he did not get), hinting that the company might loosen up a little for such incidentals. "As A. J. Rigby said to me the other day," he remarked, "speaking of a law-suit in which he had just been successful: '*Your* company would have lost it. I gained it with money I was permitted to account for by raising my salary.'"¹⁸ The Black Hills Company's policy did appear picayunish: Bierce without salary or adequate petty cash, with a skeleton staff, not even an office sweeper—there is something pathetic about the general agent's cleaning his own office and making his own bed—Walker carping about the pay of his lone assistant, Eddie Kaufman, and of the necessary messenger, Boone May. All that was more like counterjumping quibbles over pennies than the proper financial support of a large corporation.

Apropos of Walker, that gentleman did not dawdle. Heedless of the Bierce request for a hearing, also of McGinnis-Eaton protests, he forthwith presented his bill of charges to the directors. When Bierce heard of it a week later, he supposed that his goose was already cooked, but he nevertheless wrote at some length to Eaton. "I judge from the tenor of your letter of the 16th inst.," he said,

that it is now too late to reply effectually to the charges of Mr. Walker therein contained; but having as yet no notifi-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.



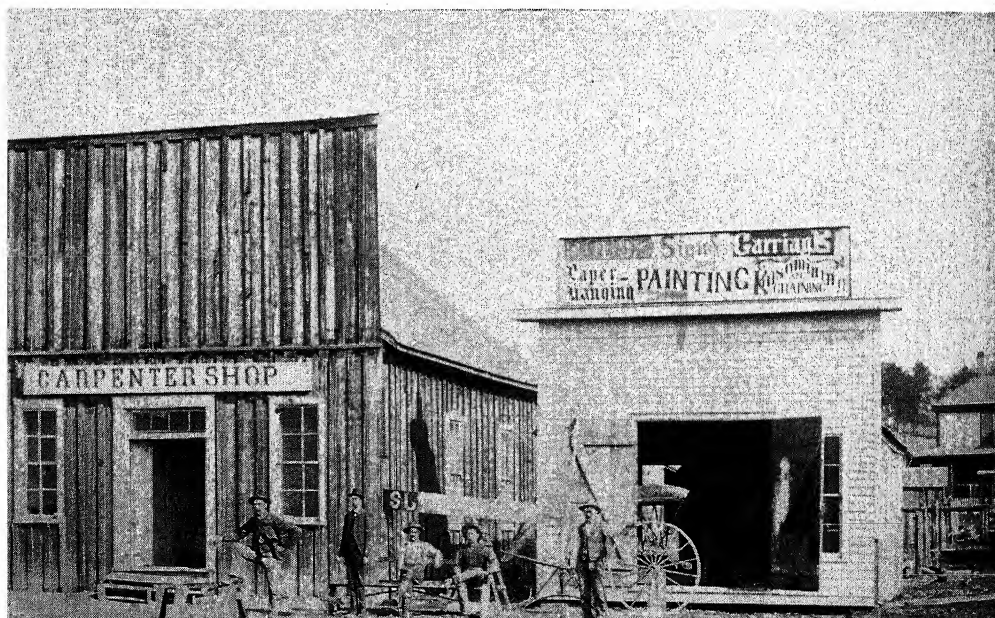
Private collection, Rapid City

Deadwood, 1887



Suburban Rockerville, about 1900

A Dakota town, in the 1890's



cation of their having been acted on, I must treat them as if they certainly had not, and must beg the indulgence of being heard by the Directors, even if I have already been removed *without* a hearing.

In the first place, I wish to protest against what I conceive to be the unfair advantage taken of me by Mr. Walker, who up to the time of his departure—after he had gone through all my accounts, etc.,—professed, in unmistakable terms, the satisfaction that he had at first not shown, thus throwing me off my guard, and gaining nearly a week's time in which to present his accusations without my knowledge of their nature or that they were to be made.

To the charge that I am nervous and irritable I shall only reply that I had much in Mr. Walker's manner to irritate me, and that at the time of his visit I was ill, and have been ever since, from over-work and loss of sleep. You will bear witness that I have repeatedly written you to the same effect, and to Mr. Walker, asking for relief.

"I am unskilled in dealing with men on business principles." That is a too vague accusation for either proof or disproof. I think I better know the character of Western men and miners than Mr. Walker does, and that the business principles familiar in New York are not adapted to the Black Hills.

That "I had no books open" is untrue, and in this connection I beg you to refer to my personal letter to you of the 14th inst . . . and request that it be read to the Directors. That, I think, covers all Mr. Walker's charges relative to my accounts

My memoranda were "kept on a wire where they could be easily lost." As it is not asserted that they *were* lost it is unnecessary to further notice that statement.

That "there was no account regarding those important charges or disbursements which we may have to contest sometime in court against West." My cashbook shows every such charge and disbursement, and Mr. Walker

knows it, for he made copious notes from it. It is open to inspection with reference to the truth or falsity of that statement by any expert that may be appointed to examine it. Indeed, Mr. Walker's own expert made up the statements alluded to above from that cash-book.

If my pay-rolls were "a mass of confusion" to Mr. Walker that is because Mr. Walker was unfamiliar with the cumbrous and involved system under which I was compelled to pay. They were not *my* pay rolls at all, but Mr. Pinney's, whose debts I was paying, and whose system I had no right to alter, and could not arbitrarily have done so without giving him the right to say that I had impeded him in the execution of West's agreement with the company. The pay rolls are clear enough, and considering that they had frequently to be altered at the pay table, owing to the ignorance and carelessness of the foreman from whose inaccurate time-books they were made up, and that payments were commonly made at the camps at night, sometimes in a barroom filled with half-drunken and reasonless men, they are a marvel of lucidity. But I cannot, of course, hope to make the circumstances of my payments—particularly the first—understood in New York I did as I did with my eyes open, *knowing* that I laid myself open to such accusations, and knowing that they could be fatal if pressed, for it would be impossible to give the Directors any conception of the circumstances and exigencies of that time. I simply do not envy the man who takes advantage of such an opportunity, that is all.

Mr. Walker's judgment as to how I might have systematized my business, the proper office-hours etc., lacks the merit of being based on experience, however strongly it may be founded upon intuition. I venture to believe that I am as good a judge as he as to how I could best get through with my various duties, and economise my time. He came here when I had struggled through, and things were calm and comparatively well systematized. But *I* had done it.

If Mr. Walker learned that "the prominent men in the Black Hills are unanimous in the belief that I am not competent" I presume he furnished a list of their names, and showed that they were familiar with the workings of my office, and had devoted considerable time to the study and investigation of my affairs.

One of Mr. Walker's accusations has the accidental merit of truth—that I have "made some expensive mistakes." Even this, however, has not the merit of originality: I made the same statement myself, in a letter to Mr. McGinnis dated Aug. 17th, in one to you dated Aug. 24th, and at various other times. If Mr. Walker will have the fairness to specify *what* mistakes I have made I pledge myself to either refute his assertions or confess their truth. I have not professed to be infallible.

Regarding my secretary, he is not *only* a "gentleman" but a capable and experienced man of business. If Mr. Walker thinks I need a "book-keeper" I have only to reply that I tried every way I knew how to get one when I needed another besides Mr. Kaufman, with whose abilities in that way, however, I am entirely content. *If* I had no book-keeper, however, and *if* it is conceded that I tried hard to get one (and my letter book and telegrams will show that I did) how am I so severely censurable for the alleged informality of my accounts? Nobody, I hope, ever supposed I was a book keeper.

The man whom Mr. Walker calls my "guard" he knows to be my "messenger." He never "sat about my office with a gun" at all. One day when Mr. Girdler assumed the duty of handling my money nearly all day, my messenger (who had guarded it in transit from Rapid, and guarded Mr. Walker, too) was in the office a good deal, whether from excess of zeal or suspicion of Mr. Girdler I really cannot say; I did not observe his presence until Mr. Walker mentioned it . . . this man . . . has *never* acted as a guard except in escorting currency through a country infested with

robbers and cutthroats. Mr. Walker was a little afraid of him, but he is really quite harmless if tenderly handled.

To sum up: I affirm of Mr. Walker's accusations that, in so far as they are not childishly vague and general, they are definitely and accurately false.¹⁹

Those were good answers to charges that were, as he said, either untrue, too vague for proof or disproof, or, he might have added, too trivial to mention. His irritability and office hours, for instance. Irritable he undoubtedly was, often, but he had reason: too many duties, too many road-blocks, too many meddlers like Walker, who were enough to try the patience of a far more saintly man than Bierce. He might be allowed and forgiven irritability, particularly since in spite of it—or because of it—he pushed the company's work ahead. The reasonable view would be that a manager who kept the work going should be permitted his crotchets, also his choice of office hours. He could scarcely count on regular hours anyhow, since he might be called away at any moment to solve this or that practical problem perhaps miles distant. A construction boss cannot adequately oversee work gangs from the vantage point of a swivel chair. Yet Mr. Walker apparently thought that running this job was no different from sitting behind a mahogany desk in Wall Street.

The reference to illness—the only one in all these letters—is significant. Afflicted with chronic asthma that racked him sorely, he must often have been reduced to misery. Possibly the four-thousand-foot altitude of the Hills brought some relief, but it was not curative. Later, when forced to flee from the fogs of the San Francisco Bay region to high

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, September 24, 1880. II, 165-73.

ground at Auburn and Los Gatos, even there he spent painful nights sitting up fighting for breath, and resorting to the opiate of a pad soaked in chloroform. On many a day at Rockerville he may have felt too wretched to move, yet he did move without ever whining about illness, or even, except this once, alluding to it.

The charges about his accounts may be dismissed. That he managed in the midst of turmoil to keep any at all was remarkable; he not only kept them, but had them verified and praised by Walker's man, Chambers, and by Walker himself. The charge that prominent Hills businessmen believed him incompetent was a misty generality that looked like one of those sweeping conclusions based on a few vague guesses. Bierce might have mentioned that if these business men were the same ones who had endorsed and defended Captain West, their opinions hardly deserved a hearing.

About his lack of skill in dealing with men on business principles, the fact of his having overcome tremendous difficulties to complete the company's works was in itself a refutation. His keeping creditors quiet by temporizing and "diplommatizing" was another excellent example of intelligent dealing with men and adept use of business principles.

Walker's unjust charges proved merely that he was determined to dispose of Bierce by whatever means. Whether or not he sincerely believed in his accusations, the discrepancy between them and his cordial approval at Rockerville showed him up as at least a two-faced liar. Such hitting below the belt made a fair fight impossible, as Bierce well knew. He had had enough—more than enough. After writing his detailed reply to Walker's charges, he wrote another missive, much shorter and more formal:

Rockerville, D. T.

Sept. 24th, 1880.

Major S. B. Eaton,

Dear Sir,

I hereby place in your hands, and authorize you to tender to the Board of Directors of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company, my resignation as General Agent of the Company in Dakota.

I am very truly yours,

A. G. BIERCE

This resignation to take effect immediately on presentation.

A. G. B.²⁰²⁰ II, 173A.

7. *A Fourth Act*

EATON's response was an anguished moan and a distracted plea to hold on until the appointment of a successor: "Do you not owe it to John and me to stand by the wreck until we say go?" Things were in "an awful way," he said: no funds, much dissension among the directors, and Walker driving toward first place. "You have been shamefully treated You are in a bad hole. And I hope you will hang on. To-day we are perfecting our mortgage, & getting out the circulars to get the stockholders assents, & meantime are trying to raise \$10,000—and now, on top of it all, comes your telegram! Oh dear!"¹ Sherb's appeal to loyalty was irresistible. For three weeks more, Bierce hung on.

Another good friend, Charlie Kaufman, also advised holding on, if not as general agent, then in some other capacity. "I . . . would present myself to my principals for orders They will, I do not doubt, want to use you in other cognate enterprises."² Perhaps. But if Walker were principal, Bierce would starve rather than truckle for a job to that man—or to Shaler. Remember, said Charlie, that "Eaton & McGinnis can't accomplish impossibilities, and if they are

¹ S. B. Eaton to Bierce, September 27, 1880. II, 174B.

² C. H. Kaufman to Bierce, September 24, 1880. II, 174A.

forced to back down or more probably to compromise in regard to upholding you, you needn't feel sacrificed, nor need you quarrel with the Gods. Take it and wait."³ That was salutary advice; Charlie was evidently a seasoned campaigner who had been through the "business" mill, which crushes both the just and the unjust. Probably Bierce did feel that he was being sacrificed, but if he had any complaint to make of the gods, it must have been minor beside grievances against the ungodlike Walker. To be done in by Olympians was more dignified and less damaging to the spirit than to be winged from ambush by a human schemer. Still, the general agent pro tem listened, took it, and waited, resuming his routine of duties almost as if nothing had happened.

Around him the same old specters recommenced a dance as familiar as a recurrent nightmare. As usual, he had no money. The ten thousand dollars mentioned by Eaton had not materialized, nor would it have done much good if it had. Like Tillinghast's proposed fifteen-thousand-dollar relief fund, this one was certainly too little, if not too late. Such dribblets were tentative and cautious at a time that called for boldness. Bierce had rightly taunted the New Yorkers for their lack of nerve. Either they misjudged the situation, or they were unwilling to face squarely a crisis that offered these alternatives: quitting at once without putting in another cent, closing the books, and swallowing losses with or without grimaces; or plunging with an additional subsidy of not less than \$100,000. Ten thousand, fifteen thousand—even fifty thousand—would not catch up with debts and lawsuits, let alone push the work forward to the point of gold assets in the sluice boxes. If Cornelius Vanderbilt, say, could have been tapped for a good round sum, this company might yet have pulled through, even though weighted with the

³ *Ibid.*

millstones of interfering officers and disagreeing directors. Timid and hesitant contributions only went right down the drain with a loud swoosh.

All Bierce knew was that he had to pay off with promises. "Nothing to pay laborers with to-morrow," he said. "Many hold our obligations payable Oct. 1st, and having been discharged have been waiting here for days to get their time."⁴ Defaulting on wages and other debts had become a scandal in the district. From Deadwood—celebrating the first anniversary of the great fire with bands, speeches, and parades—the *Press* roared denunciation of "That Dishonest Company." Inconceivable, retorted the *Rapid Journal*: "The gentlemen having charge are highly respected business men of New York and San Francisco."⁵ What humorists these newspaper fellows were. To Bierce, at any rate, some in charge were unworthy of respect and were no gentlemen. "Things are in a bad way here," he said:

The common belief is that the company is "busted," and Willsie and I are "standing off" creditors till we can make a clean-up and "light out" with it. It is openly asserted, too, that we are in a ring to buy up the time-checks (due bills for labor) which I have issued to the men. Yesterday my secretary, who is crippled—shot himself through the hand the other day accidentally—was rudely assailed with threats and abuse by a number of rascally fellows who claim to be creditors of the company, and had to beat a retreat to save himself from rough handling.

We have numbers of men at work whom we do not now need, but it is impossible to discharge them. Moreover, the men whom we do need—whom we are trying to *rush* to get our boxes in again—won't work with any heart, and the

⁴ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 30, 1880. II, 195.

⁵ October 9, 1880.

foreman has just informed me that he expects them to strike or do worse at any moment. I am doing all I can for them by giving them orders against their pay for what they must have at the stores here which still take our paper. Walker will no doubt howl against this "unbusinesslike" proceeding, but he may go to the devil . . .

The company's stock, Girdler says, is being offered at 30c. a share. Good Lord, what an opportunity for one who can take enough of it to control the mine!

Don't show this letter to anybody (unless to McGinnis); it is for your private information. You ought to know how things are going here; for the directors generally, I don't care a cent whether they know or not. They have treated me rascally unfairly, and they may find out for themselves how things are. I may write one or two more letters to the President, and I *shall* do all I can for the company while I stay. But under the circumstances it can't be much.⁶

That the company was still afloat—barely perhaps, yet waterborne—on an uneasy sea covered with paper was the result, largely, of skillful Bierce navigation. Before many months, however, a heavy weight of I.O.U's. would wash aboard the craft and sink it.

A deputy sheriff delivered notices of three more legal actions, two of the plaintiffs having attached five miles of flume. "This makes six law suits on hand at present," said Bierce, "including the action taken in my name against the First National Bank. They don't alarm me much, but they will worry Walker."⁷ Anything likely to worry Walker was scarcely likely to grieve Bierce. Nevertheless he did not fulminate about Walker and his dirty work. He wrote no tirades, merely dropped casual but pointed remarks, as if to

⁶ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, October 11, 1880. III, 263-65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, September 30, 1880. II, 194.

say that since the man had so clearly defined his own character, it should be patent to all without need of more words.

I know Walker to be a liar and a sneak; if such a man is not also a thief it is for want of opportunity, and that opportunity he will have if he controls this mine.⁸

... you ask me who will make the better manager, Walker or Shaler. Is it a joke, a conundrum, or what? I won't answer, anyhow. Toss a copper to decide it.⁹

Ruminations on the Shaler-Walker behavior during his bullyragged career as general agent produced an exposition of the normal methods of mining companies as he had observed them. "I am astonished to learn," he said,

that Walker is to have a salary of \$400 a month. In San Francisco the Secretary of a mining company gets, generally, from \$50 to \$75 a month. One man is commonly Secretary for several mines; some men have six or eight mines, paying a book keeper from their own pockets. There is really almost nothing for them to do, except for a few days at the last of one month and the beginning of another. They transmit to the Directors the reports etc., of the Superintendent, to the Superintendent the resolutions of the Directors, make minutes of the Directors' meetings, and transfers of stock in the books. They have absolutely no authority, are mere clerks.

The Treasurer is generally a banker.

The President has no authority except at Directors' meetings, over which it is [his] function to preside, though he usually does not take the trouble to do it. The Superintendent addresses official letters to him; he has no salary,

⁸ Bierce to John McGinnis, Jr., October 7, 1880. III, 234.

⁹ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, October 5, 1880. III, 219.

and no more to say in the management than any other stockholder—that is to say, nothing.

The Engineer has nothing to do with the home office, and knows no superior but the Superintendent, from whom he takes his orders and his salary.

There is but one man who has any inherent authority—the Superintendent at the mine. He acknowledges no superior but the Directors, acting as a Board, by resolution.

... Walker is a knave, and an idiot, but if he is to remain here in charge he should be given absolute authority in Dakota, and be subject to no orders but resolutions of the Board or Executive Committee

I think you can get from these remarks an answer to your question how I think things will be “run” after I leave. It depends on who is to manage your mine, and what is meant by management. You will get nothing from your investment under your present system, most assuredly.¹⁰

“System” was a facetious word for the Black Hills Company, which from the beginning had steadfastly obeyed the imperative of its watchword, “muddle.” Bierce had remarked that the New York gentlemen playing at mining should “learn the business,” but after almost a year they were still rank amateurs. Nevertheless, on the score of centralized control, if Walker took charge he would probably assume plenty of authority, regardless of directives from the Executive Committee. McGinnis and Eaton, however, favored Willsie for the job. Bierce remarked that he was a good engineer, “*civil* engineer,” but that he knew nothing of gravel mining:

I don’t say this to his disparagement; he does not profess to know. He is, moreover, the worst judge of men I ever

¹⁰ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, September 27, 1880. II, 186–88.

saw. Thum and Pinney were *his* men, and for Walker he has an admiration that is akin to reverence. I really did not know the extent of my knowledge of mining until I came to contrast it with Willsie's; Shaler's absolute and unspeakable ignorance did not draw it out.

I have advised Willsie, as much as I could venture to do, as to how to lay the piping, set the boxes, and go to work, but I should myself have done the whole thing very differently. I cannot, of course, know that my way would have got better results, but I am entirely clear that it would have got them with less expense, and quicker.¹¹

Speaking of boxes reminded him again of water. Everybody was after it, he said, trying to "inch" him, and willing to pay high rates. "I was offered yesterday \$75.00 for 150 inches," he said,

the purchaser to take it from our flume himself. He would have given a hundred, for he has a ditch . . . by which, by a small extension, he could take it into Coulson Gulch—just where I would never let it go if I managed things here. This man avers that he has ground of his own that he can make \$100 per day per man on, if he can get water; if not, he means to leave the country. Most of them will leave if assured they will get no water, and that is what I have been making them fear for some weeks. Since my connection with the company there has not been *one man* who having, or fancying he had, an advantage of us has not pressed it to the utmost. It is now our turn, and in one year if I remained here I would get, for "bed-rock" prices, a great many of the richest claims in this district. In five I would have them all—and not make enemies either. Nothing is to-day keeping this camp alive but the hope of buying our water. You will have discouragement and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, September 30, 1880. II, 189-90.

disappointment in using it yourselves, and many tempting offers for it; but *don't you sell an inch!*¹²

As a would-be monopolist, Bierce could have qualified as a Black Hills variety of robber baron. It would have been interesting to watch him cornering all the rich claims without making enemies. Possibly he could have brought it off, in the teeth of Walker's assertion that he did not know how to deal with men.

In this letter he also said, "Don't you tell anybody but McGinnis that I am coming to N. Y.," and added a top-of-the-page note: "You positively must relieve me if you have not already done so before receipt of this. I shall not wait here much longer." Mr. Walker being soon due to arrive once more in the Hills, Bierce stayed only to hand over office keys, broom, and so forth before setting out eastward. He had much to tell McGinnis and Eaton, and he was impatient to be off. Nevertheless, while "waiting," he was about as busy and as harried as ever.

As a distorted climax to the efforts of the now unofficial general agent, the company in early October washed gold for the first time in its own sluice boxes. Bierce reported with pride and latent excitement tempered by irony. "At midnight Sunday," he said,

we began washing, and to-day the gold shows beautifully in our boxes. Shall to-night write to the President a full account of our work so far as we have got.

In accordance with your advice I permitted—or rather insisted on Willsie's having his own way in laying pipe, setting boxes, etc., but have been compelled to assume the direction of the work, and have, in fact, held the lever much of the time myself. So I am a little better off than

¹² *Ibid.*, 191-92.

Moses was on the summit of Pisgah; I have been fascinated not only to behold the promised land toward which I have toiled through this damnable wilderness, but have even put my great toe across the boundary line. I am expecting Walker now daily, and shall pull out for N. Y. the moment he comes. There is much to tell you—things that you *must* know

. . . I am trying to leave everything ship-shape for my successor, but several important accounts—for lumber, timber, dam, etc., I shall be unable to get up. Up to the time of Walker's arrival Willsie and I worked together. He had been on the work from the first, made all the estimates, and knew of all payments made I never paid anything to sub-contractors without his verification Since Walker came I have been unable to get a single figure from him. He not only disclaims all responsibility for what has been done, and all knowledge of it, but withholds the figures necessary to making up accounts for final settlement In short, he takes refuge from responsibility in his capacity of mere engineer. It is nothing less than damned perfidy if it is not something more. I begin, most reluctantly, to believe that he and Walker have had an understanding all along—to work me out and Willsie in.

It is ridiculous for Willsie to aspire to the superintendency of this or any mine. He knows *nothing* of mining, and even after I had placed him in sole charge of laying the pipe and setting the boxes he came to me constantly for advice—and then followed that of one of his engineers, who once did some ground-sluicing. Even Thompson, Willsie's best friend, his partner, and his foreman, says the whole thing, from the penstock to the bank, has been done wrong. And it has. This need not discourage you; the water comes through the nozzle—most of it—washes the gravel down, and the gold lodges in the riffles—though it would not have done so if I had not happened along just

in time to stop a damned engineer from leaving a clear run-way *under the blocks* from end to end!

I'm sick of engineers and engineering. They were the most intelligent and useful men on the work when the flume was in progress, but the less civil-engineering—or any engineering—you have about your nozzles the better off you will be.¹³

A show of color in the riffles was good, but a lucrative cleanup was doubtful. Winter came early in the Hills, and the season was getting on. Ice forming on October nights forecast a shutdown in a few weeks. The Willsie management was uncertain, capricious, and, according to Bierce, all wrong. He kept his mouth shut, however, unless asked to open it, but he could not resist commenting in his letters on the engineer's mistakes. "How the work of mining has been done under the leadership of an independent engineer department," he said, "may be judged from the fact that we have already had to take up and remove our whole line of tail-sluice (960 feet) and over a thousand feet of pipe, which being wrongly put down leaked and has to be relaid. The expense of these mistakes in money and time I shall not estimate."¹⁴ When Willsie stopped the work to negotiate for new ground, to which he proposed to shift the sluices, Bierce remarked: "It is good ground but we should have made a better clean-up this season by letting it alone and working where we were, now that we have got *under* instead of *above* bed-rock, as in the plenitude of somebody's wisdom it was deemed best to begin."¹⁵

Withal, his sense of justice made him admit that since the engineer did not pretend to knowledge of mining, he

¹³ Bierce to S. B. Eaton, October 5, 1880. III, 218-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, October 11, 1880. III, 261.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, October 10, 1880. III, 258.

could scarcely avoid mistakes. They were "not Willsie's fault," said Bierce:

I communicated to him the fact that my friends in the Board favored him for Superintendent and had advised me to let him have his way. He could do no less than take it. His only error with regard to this matter was in taking the advice of another instead of me. He professes no knowledge of mining himself, and I suppose took Walker's word that I had none. Willsie is "down" since Walker has thrown him over—as it was evident from the first that he would—and I am really sorry for him. His weaknesses are subserviency to whoever he thinks in power; a too exalted opinion of his own smartness; and a disposition to intrigue. He is not true to his friends; more, I think, because he suspects their fidelity than from any other reason. He is now very much humiliated and I am good to him.¹⁶

To expedite the company's confusion policy, Mr. Girdler showed up. Evidently he, too, had been duped by Walker, about whom he talked bitterly, and whom, said Bierce, "he professes to have 'found out.'" He was also sharply critical of "the way in which Willsie has done his work of bulkhead, pipes, and tail-sluiques." Never hesitant to say how things should be done, Girdler offered advice freely and copiously, thus appointing himself the fourth member of a managerial quartet otherwise composed of Willsie, Thompson, the foreman, and Bierce as background consultant. Four managers on one job was a record, even for the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. In the frenzy of resetting sluice boxes here, relaying pipe there, work stoppage, and mind-changing, the foreman, spinning like a top, reeled into babbling despair. "Thompson swears he will do no more until he knows what is wanted and who is boss," said Bierce,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, October 11, 1880. III, 262-63.

and meantime ice is forming everywhere. This is a real winter day, and we cannot hope to work more than two or three weeks anyhow unless this prove an exceptional season. Meantime, with the exception of a small proportion of the finer gold which we cleaned up from the boxes in order to remove them, the product of our race lies on bed rock in the excavation, the grade of the ground-slucice having been too flat to carry it down.

This all illustrates the advantages of your present system—no concord in the home office, no directing and responsible head at the mine. And coincident with it all comes your telegram saying I *must* remain until the chief anarch shall arrive. My dear fellow, I think, with the imperfect light I have, that there is a carefully devised plan to execute that very common dodge—throw everything into confusion, render it impossible to do effective work, breed universal distrust, makes the stock worthless, and take it in. Anyhow, if this kind of thing is to continue you are badly “cinched.” Girdler is declaring, even to the men, that he does not believe Walker will bring any money . . . I shall obey your wishes and remain as long as I can stand it. I shall even continue to uphold and assist Thompson to do effective work. He is Willsie’s man, but he relies on and believes in me. I have been working with him every night and day. He acts cheerfully on every suggestion from me and reluctantly on every order from Willsie. So we hope to accomplish something, but it is discouraging.¹⁷

Yes, the outlook was discouraging. Even if time and too many bosses permitted much washing, “I fear,” said Bierce, “it won’t do us any good . . . for it is more than likely the gold will be attached in our boxes, and we shall have the valuable assistance of a deputy sheriff in cleaning up.”¹⁸ A

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, October 10, 1880. III, 257–60.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 11, 1880. III, 264–65.

deputation of workmen informed the company that, unless they were paid, they would not work themselves, and that they would prevent anybody else from working. "They were very civil," he said,

and I think they are reasonable. They were sorry to cause me any annoyance, but were pretty hard on Walker. The result of the interview was a dispatch to Shaler, and pending a reply they will work as usual. Whether we make a clean-up this season will depend on the nature of the answer. The men can stop us if they wish, in a legal manner, and they make no threat of anything else. If I considered myself in authority nothing else would be tolerated. But without authority or even moral "backing," without money and without credit, it will be impossible to get any men to work if these merely quit. The men now working are all good men, and merely out of regard for me would refrain from destruction of property; but many bad men are among our creditors, and our property, extending for eighteen miles through a wild country, is much exposed.

Girdler, I think, is making all the mischief. Thompson says so, and I know that he (Girdler) has been talking to the men all day nearly. If he has talked to them as he talks to others that is all they need to make them strike. I think he is performing his function of "bear" in Walker's interest and his own, but of course I am in the dark. There is *some* game.¹⁹

The Bierce career was closing in a climactic display of disorganization and intrigue. A final demonstration occurred in a contretemps involving the company's Dakota attorney. Bierce, having been told that Daniel McLaughlin would replace Caulfield, had assured McLaughlin that he was to act for the company, and had retained him in the action against the First National Bank. Now, however, the vacillating

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 266-67.

Executive Committee reversed itself to reappoint Caulfield. "Since Walker is to go west and see to things," said Eaton, "it is but just that he should have his choice, and he prefers Caulfield." So the disconcerted Bierce was let down once again, but for the last time. "Have *I* not been 'seeing to things'?" he asked:

Was it not known that I preferred McLaughlin? Yet you do not appear to have thought it "but just" that I should have *my* choice.

In employing McLaughlin I was acting with the full knowledge and approval of the majority of the Executive Committee, and on a distinct understanding that he was to be made the company's attorney. The understanding existed before I was an officer of the company, and had been affirmed by resolution. The position of company's attorney was, in fact,—though not outwardly—a part of the purchase price of the Oliver water-right, and the Committee's action is nothing else than a bare and direct repudiation of a debt—an obligation all the more binding because it was a kind of "debt of honor." McLaughlin parted with his property on our repeated intimations that he was to receive the appointment. Then we go back on him! If the company thinks it has either the advantages or the skill to do that kind of thing with impunity in this country against a man like McLaughlin, in favor of a man like Caulfield, it will make a costly mistake. Mr. McLaughlin is a gentleman, wealthy and influential; Benney Caulfield is an impecunious fellow, commonly found in bar-rooms, has no social standing, and is *in* all manner of schemes, every one of them adverse to this company's interest or designed to "bleed" it.

Mr. McLaughlin has served us ever since about the 10th of last July, and has sent no bill for his services, on the understanding that he was actually, and would soon be avowedly, the attorney for the company in the sense that

Caulfield now is. Besides having been entrusted by me with the general business of the company, he has been regularly engaged in no fewer than five important cases now pending in the First District Court He has all the papers, and has been by me put in possession of many of the facts necessary to success, including all the information of such a nature that I will not impart it to Benney Caulfield. Neither Walker nor Caulfield has the knowledge of the facts necessary to success in these suits, and if I were still in a position to advise I should advise that they be settled out of court, or that you let judgment go against you by default. It will be useless to incur the expense of contesting them. My present advice would be to immediately reverse your action in making Caulfield your attorney.

I shall at once withdraw my complaint against the First National Bank, and let the company recover its money in its own way.

As to Walker's "preference" for Caulfield. All the time he was here he gave me to understand that he favored McLaughlin. He said so a dozen times, and distinctly told me he approved my course in not consulting Caulfield The only bond of union or sympathy between Walker and Caulfield was their mutual disgust with Shaler, Walker in my presence saying to Caulfield that he thought Shaler a partner of West in the contract, and that he (Walker) would give anything for evidence to convict him. Caulfield confessed he had been deceived in and by Shaler. The next time I went to Deadwood Caulfield was "all for Shaler" again.

Can you not see from these things how you are being duped, and how you are about to be robbed? By Jove, it will almost serve you right for your retention of Shaler, your bad faith in McLaughlin, and your practical cooperation with Walker by giving him Caulfield.

I wash my hands of it all.²⁰

²⁰ *Ibid*, October 7, 1880. III, 237-44.

It was high time to wash his hands, for the waters were becoming more muddy by the minute. "Girdler says," he wrote, "Walker is *not* bringing out money to pay off the debts of the Company. God help him if he doesn't."²¹ And again: "Girdler says Willsie has been discharged, and he, Girdler, seems to be bossing things. I am all in the dark and indifferent. The McLaughlin action lets me out."²² What would the company have done without the indispensable Mr. Girdler? Yet even with him it appeared to be disintegrating like a paper shoe in a rainstorm.

Walker had not arrived, but Bierce was too disgusted to delay any longer his taking off. This mess was becoming a thick stew compounded of mysterious ingredients stirred by all sorts of cooks. He wrote notes to Eddie Kaufman and Boone May, requesting them to stay on the job until relieved "by some properly authorized officer of the company"; to McLaughlin and Caulfield asking them to withdraw his suit against the First National Bank; to General Shaler—one of the few times he condescended to address the president—announcing that from October 16 his resignation was "absolute and final." He compiled a "List of Papers in the Office of Black Hills P. M. Co., Rockerville," and drew up his accounts. On his books the unpaid bills totaled over fifty thousand dollars. To that long list he added the statement of another unpaid bill:

A. G. Bierce

in a/c with

Black Hills Placer Mining Company

To balance as per a/cs rendered

Drafts Mrs. Bierce

Dr.

629.76

750.75

\$1,380.51

By Services as Gen. Agent from		Cr.
June 18 1880 to Oct. 16 1880 =		
120 days @ \$5000.00 per year		\$1643.83
Credit	\$1643.83	
Dr.	1380.51	
Bal.	\$263.32	
adl.	21.50	
	<u>\$284.82²³</u>	

Five thousand a year was a good salary for 1880, but how he arrived at that figure is a mystery, neither trustees, nor directors, nor Executive Committee having so far reached this item on their agendas. Perhaps Eaton suggested it, and Bierce assented in a private agreement between them. If that method was irregular, it was at least consistent with the eccentricities of this peculiar organization. Those "Drafts Mrs. Bierce" were presumably periodic borrowings lifted from the office safe. During his entire stay in Rockerville, he received from the Black Hills Company not one dime he could call his own, and at the end of an unspeakable four months he could show, on paper, a net gain of \$284.82. Perhaps that did become actual cash in hand. Although the record does not say whether this bill was paid, Eaton surely must have dug up the money somewhere. For the expenses of the trip to New York, he did send Bierce \$500, the only money the general agent ever got on this job, even that probably being not from the company treasury, but from Eaton's personal account.

Without more ado Bierce pushed off for the home office. That was the end of four of the most hellish months he

²¹ *Ibid.*, October ?, 1880. III, 253.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ III, 295B.

had ever experienced, or ever would experience; the end of free-for-alls with West, Shaler, Walker, Girdler, and the whole unlovely tribe; the end of being let down, crossed up, and run over; and the end of fighting invisible opponents in the dark. He must have relished the relief of freedom.

He remained over two months in New York, where he no doubt talked many times long and earnestly to Eaton. Sherb apparently argued him out of withdrawing his action against the First National Bank, for on November 5 he requested McLaughlin to continue the suit. That was, for the second time, a mistake. Probably Bierce imparted, and received, a quantity of off-the-record information, and probably he discovered the grimy details of whatever plots had been hatched and were hatching. But he kept his findings to himself. From the moment he left Rockerville, he was a clam on the subject of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. He did not allude to his experience in letters to his friends or in subsequent newspaper columns, nor did he write any sketches about the Black Hills, its mines, or its people, except the brief narrative about Boone May. Even that did not appear until at least fifteen years later, when time had perhaps eased the smarting pain of frustration and defeat. He did not ever return, or express any desire to return, to the red earth gulches. If heretofore infected with gold fever, he was cured; if once eager to become a miner, he was allergic to the thought of it. From then on he was a newspaperman only.

Meanwhile Marcus Walker, taking his time, arrived in the Hills by the end of October, his coming heralded by restrained applause. "We learn," said the *Deadwood Times*,

that paymaster Walker, of the Flume company, who has so long been looked for and yearned after by the company's

creditors, as the heart of the solid south sighs after the national hash house, has arrived and last Wednesday began liquidating their long delayed time checks. As a majority of the laborers had sold their orders, folded their blankets and swearingly tramped away, no great boom will follow the paymaster's advent.

Mr. C. A. Girdler is present to take charge of the affairs of the company²⁴

Surely no other company was ever blessed with so versatile a helper as Mr. Girdler, who was an agile corporation fireman sliding down the brass pole into every crisis. Of all the unofficial assisting, advising, and taking charge, his was most ready and most frequent.

As predicted, Walker's liquidation of time checks did not materially change the *status quo*. The flume had come to a stop on the north side of Rockerville Gulch, its water covering only a small bar there and Rockerville Gulch proper. One pipe ran continually on ground not considered the best, but, no cleanup having been made, nobody knew how the work was paying. Winter was about to stall operations, but an empty treasury was about to stall them just as soon, if not sooner.

Whatever money Walker brought was not nearly enough. On December 1, the directors mortgaged the company to William Dowd, a trustee, for \$50,000 "to discharge its indebtedness arising out of the completion of its works . . . and to meet current and other expenses before adequate proceeds can be realized from washings" ²⁵ The party of the first part issued a series of 6 per cent coupon bonds at fifty to one thousand dollars each, payable in two years.

²⁴ October 30, 1880.

²⁵ Mortgage Record, Pennington County, Dakota Territory, Book A, 94-103.

This move created the illusion of hope, bolstered by a company election that tossed General Shaler out of the presidency and elected a new president, Cornelius J. Vanderbilt. There was a name impressive enough to underwrite anybody's optimism. "We are informed by C. A. Girdler," said the *Rapid City Journal*, "that all indebtedness will probably be paid within a short time, and operations will be resumed upon the ground in the spring under very favorable auspices."²⁶

An agreeable prospect, if true. Unfortunately, Girdler's information was completely unreliable. The mortgage maneuver was woefully inadequate. As heretofore suggested, the game at that point might better have been double or nothing. Those "other" expenses being huge and demanding, thanks to Captain West, that fifty thousand did not stretch far enough to cover them. It was swallowed up before anybody had a chance to apply it to "current." The auspices for spring operations were anything but favorable. They were so poor that within the next ten months Mr. Dowd and the bondholders had lost their money, and the company had ceased to exist as a going concern.

Yet at the moment nobody foresaw this dreary conclusion, least of all Walker, who heartened claim owners by the promise that indeed, yes, the company would certainly lease its water, thus scrapping the Bierce plan of no leases. Walker's assurances not only cheered them up, but also revived criticism of the former general agent. One severe critic, signing himself "A Miner," sent to the *Rapid City Journal* a long indictment of "the incompetency of a would-be mining expert," who said "upon divers occasions that not a drop of water should be sold to anyone if he could help it, and if possible he should strive to incorporate his fiat into the laws

²⁶ January 22, 1881.

of the B. H. P. Mining Company."²⁷ Among the gullible, the gossip gained currency that Bierce had made snide remarks about the mining possibilities of the district. Home-town pride being touchy, a group of wrathful citizens forwarded to the company directors a packet of harsh criticism of their recent fellow townsman. Bierce, being in a perfect position to see this document, replied in an open letter from New York to the *Rapid City Journal*. "My attention has been called," he said,

to a letter . . . roundly abusing me and significantly praising a person named Walker. The letter, which purports to be written in refutation of my alleged "damaging reports" of the Rockerville district, is signed by some half-a-hundred residents and so-called residents of the district, only seventeen of those signing it being known to me by name; and fifteen of these have personal grievances of one kind and another, mostly my refusal as general agent of the company to pay Capt. West's private debts. In deference to the other two, and for the peace of mind of other Rockerville people who may have been similarly imposed on in the interest of those who, for their sins, have a wholesome but groundless fear of my return, permit me to say that I have never made any damaging reports of the Rockerville district. I have always considered and represented it as one of the richest I ever saw, and I am somewhat familiar with mining camps of California, Montana, Nevada, and Utah. Since leaving Rockerville, Oct. 16th last, I have made no report of any kind, nor had anything to do with the Black Hills Placer mining company, except to look on at an election in which I had no interest, and to advise one or two of the directors that, under circumstances obvious to me since arriving here, they had better sell their water. I had myself another plan, but as I was paid to serve the

²⁷ December 11, 1880.

company, not the community, even that might in time have been forgiven me, in as much as it was "business." But I am not coming back; the community will get its water and keep its ground, and I sincerely congratulate it on its good luck. I have no further interest in the company, and shall always be pleased by the welfare of the citizens of Rockerville—who didn't sign that letter.²⁸

Rockerville kept its ground, got its water, and enjoyed a brief revival of better times. For their good fortune, miners could thank the big flume. They could also thank the man who, though unwilling to lease water, nevertheless overcame tremendous odds to bring that flume through its hardest miles to Rockerville: Major A. G. Bierce, general agent.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1881.

8. *Aftermath*

IN JANUARY, 1881, Bierce returned to San Francisco and to journalism. He resumed the profession reluctantly, for he did not look upon it as a noble craft and more than once scornfully referred to himself as a mere hack writer. Before taking off for Dakota, he had expressed to one of his London friends the hope that the mining venture would take him out of the newspaper business for good and all. Yet here he was, broke, needing a job, and making the obvious retreat to the domain of copy and deadlines. If contemptuous of it, he was nevertheless at home there, and a skillful performer.

He expected, as a matter of course, to step back into his position on the staff of the *Argonaut*, but he was dashed by the rebuff of its editor, who declined to reinstate his outspoken columnist. Nevertheless, by March, Bierce was in harness as editor and chief stinger of the weekly San Francisco *Wasp*. In his column, again entitled "Prattle," he reverted to his interrupted custom of cutting comment on all sorts of things and on human wowsers, throwing many a verbal dagger at the *Argonaut* editor who had shut the door in his face. The savagery of his attacks on fronts political and social was derived perhaps from those grilling months at Rockerville, which were sour enough to make a man acid-

ulous not only about such specimens as Shaler and Walker, but also about the whole human race. At any rate, the bitter, sardonic Bierce of the *Wasp* seemed a different person from the serious general agent who wrote those earnest letters to McGinnis and Eaton. This seems, perhaps, as if to say that in a world of fools and knaves the earnest man reaped only disappointment—as if to say that one might as well protect himself by withdrawing behind the barrier of the cynic. Not again would he write himself down so revealingly or so intently as he had in his letters to Sherb.

Among his friendships, this one was as intimate as any, if not more so. Eaton being two years older, Bierce showed not a little of the admiration and reliance of an affectionate younger brother. In the eighties and thereafter, he more and more sought companionship among young people, many of whom he looked upon as literary "pupils." By the time he left California in 1899, a youthful army of devoted idolaters fluttered around him. In these relationships, the brotherly became the fatherly and tutorial, and real intimacy disappeared. Not even his friendship with the faithful George Sterling seems as genuine and man-to-man as that with Eaton.

If Bierce tried to forget the hellish Black Hills nightmare, he had only a short breather, for within a few months his suit against the First National Bank reared its inquiring head. The thing looked innocent enough at first, but as years wore on it became unattractive, then repulsive. Uninterested in the case, either emotionally or financially, he was nevertheless enmeshed, forced to relive the painful Rockerville episode in a hashing over and rehashing of facts about the whole gang—West, Shaler, Walker, Iddings, *et al.*

In September, attorneys McLaughlin and Steele opened the tiresome proceedings by requesting his deposition, also power of attorney. "We wish," said they in a breath-taking

sentence, "you would detail all the facts regarding conversations had with Mr. Thum and any other officers of the Bank and particularly that one which you related in our office, in which Thum stated to you when you made a demand upon him for this money that he was advised by the attorneys for his Bank that he had a right to retain it because it was a part of the package of money which West fraudulently got from the Bank and that it having come back peaceably into his possession that his right of property continued in the same, and state where and in whose presence this conversation occurred."¹ They also expressed "some personal interest in this action" because, like many others, they had not been paid for their services by the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. The directors later settled the pay issue by resolving that, for "the sum of one dollar and other good and valuable considerations," the company "by these presents does sell, assign, transfer and set over unto the said Daniel McLaughlin and William R. Steele *all* its right, title and interest in and to a certain claim, demand, suit, cause of action or judgment, had owned, brought or obtained by one Ambrose G. Bierce . . . against the First National Bank of Deadwood, Dakota . . ."² Possibly one reason why the plaintiff wearied of this affair was the exhausting struggle of scrambling through these thickets of language.

Since for the lawyers the situation was no win, no pay, they had more than an academic interest in the outcome. Bierce clearly understood this. "McLaughlin & Steele," he said, ". . . are working for themselves. I never liked them, but good naturedly acquiesced in their use of my paw to pull out their chestnuts, and trusted that they would not get me into any worse litigation nor put me to any expense."³ Power

¹ McLaughlin and Steele to Bierce, September 8, 1881. III, n.p.

² Exhibit L. III, n.p.

³ Bierce to John H. Boalt, April 16, 1885. III, 295E.

of attorney he refused to grant, but obligingly accommodated with a deposition, answering in great detail a long list of questions: as general agent he had had no knowledge of West's overdraft; he had seen a Shaler letter urging M. C. Thum to lend money to West; West had been tacitly recognized as superintendent until July 13; West had been advanced \$118,836; etc. Bierce complied cheerfully this time, but as with the passing of months the pile of depositions grew, likewise the file of letters and notarized documents, so grew his apprehensive irritation.

Two years later, in the First District Court at Deadwood, McLaughlin "had a pretty hard fight," he said, through an eight-day trial that ended with a verdict for the plaintiff. The defendant appealed to the Supreme Court, which reversed the decision, and because of error in the first trial, returned the case to the First District Court for retrial, the reversal charging to Bierce costs of \$400. Whereupon his attorneys asked for a new budget of testimony, this time "in a much simpler form." Furthermore, to prevent the defendant from using the argument that the money was not Bierce's but the company's, he executed an agreement "to sell, assign, transfer and set over" to McLaughlin and Steele "all my right title and interest in and to that certain claim now in suit in the District Court." "I supposed," said Bierce, "that ended the whole interesting matter, with which I have all along been disgusted and worried."⁴ But at that point he was several years short of the end. He had a good many letters yet to do, a good many signed and sealed instruments, and a good many "whereases."

Before the case came up a second time in the Deadwood court, H. A. Iddings, Captain West's former clerk and confidant, filed a complaint in intervention. That brought a re-

⁴ *Ibid.*

quest for testimony on Iddings: What agreement, if any, was made by yourself as the Agent and Superintendent of the defendant, on behalf of the defendant, to pay the plaintiff . . . ; state if you know whether the defendant ever promised to pay for the services rendered by the plaintiff . . . ; what amount of money, if you know, was advanced to and on account of Ichabod M. West, by the defendant . . . ; state any other matter or thing within your knowledge of benefit or advantage to either party as fully as if particularly interrogated

By this time—along in 1885—Bierce was so deep in a legal jungle of said plaintiffs and said defendants, now therefores, aforesaid services, transfers and set overs, that he wanted to say to hell with it and get out, but he did not know how. A litigant, he remarked in the *Wasp*, is “A person about to give up his skin for the hope of retaining his bones”; and he defined “Court Fool” as “The plaintiff.” Those costs troubled him. He did not relish paying \$400 under any circumstances, but particularly galling was the thought of paying on behalf of a company that had merited only his contempt, and that was, besides, moribund if not defunct. In desperation, he appealed to a San Francisco friend, Judge John H. Boalt. Packing up a bundle of documents bearing on the case, marked Exhibits A to L, he dispatched them with a letter asking questions: Can I call off this suit and back out of this thing? If not, what next? Must I pay those costs? What do you advise?

The judge replied at length and several times. You cannot stop the action, said he, because when you transferred your claim you forfeited power to stop the action against the will of your assignee. On costs, you appear to be liable. An application to the court representing your lack of interest in the suit might protect you from future costs, but it would

not wipe out that \$400. Furthermore, if judgment went against you, the defendant could sue, and attach "any property of yours it could find." However—on the other hand—still: he spiritedly imagined the case as it might be heard, learnedly presenting the possible arguments and counter-arguments of both sides—all that he derived from Bierce letters and exhibits. "Your letters and evidence are so exceptionally clear and intelligent," said the judge, "as to excite every lawyer's admiration The fact is my dear Bierce, you are a natural lawyer yourself and would have been an ornament to the profession."⁵ What to do next was not easy to say, but his advice for the time was: Wait. The judge was wise in the ways of courts.

Bierce waited. He could scarcely do otherwise, his lawyers and the First District Court being over a thousand miles away and himself utterly empty of brilliant tactical ideas. After a leisurely interval, the case came up for retrial in late 1885. Again a verdict for the plaintiff, throwing out Iddings' complaint in intervention; again an appeal. This time, however, the Supreme Court, in 1889, affirmed the judgment, and ended the long struggle. (That four-year interval makes an examination of the records convey the curious impression that the case made not only two, but three, round trips between courts. The impression is no doubt merely an illusion created by the spinning of the legal merry-go-round.) McLaughlin and Steele finally collected their pay, and Bierce paid those costs, reduced for some reason to \$213.⁶ Perhaps by 1889, he may have considered that a reasonable price for getting rid of this infernal affair.

Like the experience at Rockerville, this one induced

⁵ John H. Boalt to Bierce, April 24, 1885. III, n.p.

⁶ Judgment Book, Lawrence County, Dakota Territory, Book 2, 15-16. Alongside the record is the notation. "Satisfaction price filed April 3, 1889."

allergy. Courts and lawyers became popular targets for scathing comments in his newspaper columns. A lawyer, he once said, is "One skilled in circumvention of the law"; and he defined a liar as "A lawyer with a roving commission." He also took good care to avoid further legal involvement. Not again did he lightly leap into any more suits as plaintiff on his own behalf or anybody else's—not once.

While looking for a helping hand to pull him out of a morass of litigation, he may have thought of that other legal friend, Eaton. But whether Bierce asked him for advice, or whether those two kept in touch with one another does not appear. As at other points in the Bierce career, a curtain descends on this friendship in 1881, and what happened to it thereafter is unknown. Eaton's name is not listed in any of the several Bierce address books, nor did Bierce, after moving to Washington in 1900 and frequently week-ending for a week in New York, ever mention seeing Eaton. To break off would have been a pity, yet the Bierce life was full of breaks, and the record does not say whether those two corresponded or ever met again.

Sherb had wasted no regrets over the collapsing Black Hills Company, or over whatever damages he had suffered, either in money losses or in wear and tear. Apparently he pulled out soon after Bierce did, and by March, 1881, he was established in a much better berth. Thomas Edison being in the process of marketing his newfangled electric light, Eaton gave up general law practice to become vice-president of the Edison Electric Light Company. He moved in on the ground floor, literally, of Edison's four-story brownstone front at 65 Fifth Avenue, ensconced there as a front man interviewing applicants for the new light system. They came in thousands. While the lamp factory at Menlo Park produced 1,100 lamps a day, the company within the next

two years electrically lighted 193 buildings in New York City, among them the mansions of William K. Vanderbilt and J. Pierpont Morgan.

Eaton was also on the Board of Trustees, and he naturally stepped up to the presidency of the company, which gathered in the affiliates and subsidiaries that formed the nucleus of the present vast General Electric Company. From 1884 on, he served as general corporation counsel. The many imitators attempting to cash in on the profitable electric business kept him busy bringing suits for infringement. He was also attorney, adviser, and chum of Thomas A. himself.

In its early days the company had a stormy time, losing important lawsuits, being sharply criticized for mechanical breakdowns, and getting little attention from Edison, who was more interested in inventing things than in running a corporation. Nevertheless, it possessed a highly salable commodity, and its stock sold well on the New York market. For Eaton the position must have been more agreeable than being thrown and bruised by the elephantine flounderings of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. The light business did succeed, and he was in the forefront of success. Unfortunately, these barren facts tell little about him as a person, whether or not he retained those qualities Bierce admired, or whether or not success went to his head. No doubt he lived the life his nature required, just as Bierce did; perhaps in each the core was the same as always. Eaton died in 1914, the same year in which Bierce is supposed to have been shot in Mexico.

Of all post-Rockerville doings, those of General Shaler most sharply illuminate the character Bierce pointedly defined to the General's face during that bitter Deadwood conference in July, 1880. In June, 1883, Mayor Edson, of New York, nominated Shaler for city health commissioner.

Aldermen, revolting against Tammany boss, John Kelly, refused at first to confirm the appointment of a Republican in a Democratic administration, one of them surmising that it was a deal to land a job for the mayor's son. Whereupon the press hooted at the amusing spectacle of an alderman's being morally affronted by any deal. When a subsequent vote approved the nomination, the *New York Times* observed: "Mr. John Kelly was satisfied that the appointment of Gen. Shaler, a Republican, would be to his advantage, and nothing is better settled than that whatever in municipal politics is to the advantage of Mr. Kelly is to the disadvantage of the taxpayers and of the decent citizens of the City Gen. Shaler takes his office under the suspicion of having gained it by means which make it impossible that he should administer it solely or chiefly with a view to a faithful discharge of its duties."⁷ The *Times* conjectured that Shaler had been turned down the first time because, although he may have squared Mr. Kelly, he had neglected to take care of the aldermen.

The new commissioner enlarged his department, creating extra jobs, including a position for his son-in-law, and increasing the yearly budget by \$21,000. Yet, according to his many critics and the record of subsequent events, the added expense did not improve vigilance or efficiency. In late 1884, slaughterhouses and fat-rendering establishments on the East River, between Forty-fourth and Forty-seventh Streets, became a great nuisance, aggravated by a contractor named Michael J. Kane, who dumped mountainous piles of manure in the same locality. The Health Board failing to respond to the protest of residents, an embattled squadron of two hundred women, calling themselves the Ladies' Protective Health Association, investigated. With great energy,

⁷ June 14, 1883.

they poked into all sorts of unsavory spots, finding such noisome health hazards as tenements with leaking roofs, untrapped sinks, defective plumbing, and six feet of sewage in the cellars. The ladies besieged the Health Board with strong recommendations that the owners of such buildings be prosecuted, and they petitioned the Grand Jury to indict Mr. Kane.

Still the board took no steps to abate the East River nuisances or to do anything about anything; yet General Shaler could not ignore the clamor. Prodded into speech if not into action, he came up with the sage statement that "This is a very perplexing question. There are marked differences of opinion as to the healthfulness of manure."⁸ The *Times* retorted: "So long as the President of the Board of Health is in doubt about the healthfulness of manure and of manure heaps in a crowded city the politicians who are in the manure business will not suffer."⁹ The Grand Jury twice made presentments against the board: for failure to act on the manure nuisance and for the halfhearted prosecution of property owners responsible for those shocking tenements. The jury also indicted Michael Kane, who was tried, convicted, given a suspended sentence, and allowed one month to remove his manure piles. At no time did General Shaler move decisively to remedy this unhealthful condition or any other within the province of his department.

Early in 1885, the Health Board attempted to suppress news of such contagious diseases as typhus and cholera, on the plea that such reports might needlessly alarm the populace. On the other hand, argued the press, perhaps the real motive for suppression was the board's desire to conceal its own negligence. Given the character of General Shaler, the

⁸ *New York Times*, November 30, 1884.

⁹ *Ibid.*

latter guess had at least an even chance of being correct. As a municipal officer, he appeared to be no better than the more scabrous sort of politician, the *Times* plainly implying that he was only the complacent tool of anybody willing to pay for protection. His tenure produced no evidence to show that he was either informed on public health or sincerely concerned with safeguarding it.

As a military man, his standing was somewhat better, at least for a time. A major general of Volunteers, he commanded the First Division of the New York National Guard and served on a three-man state Armory Board to select and purchase armory sites for New York City regiments. As secretary of this board, General Shaler handled communications about property, inquiries about its value, and all reports.

His many years of devotion to military affairs culminated in a splendid celebration on the fortieth anniversary of his enlistment in the National Guard. In April, 1885, brothers in arms made him guest of honor at an elaborate dinner, attended by a dazzling assembly of brass and braid. "Thirty gentlemen," said the *New York Times*, "—most of them in the glittering uniforms of Generals and staff officers of the New-York State National Guard—sat at a huge round table in the alcove dining room of the Union League Club . . . ate a good dinner, and said complimentary things about Major-Gen. Alexander Shaler."¹⁰ Followed a list of generals, colonels, and one major, who must have got in by mistake. Camovita, the caterer, outdid himself in the construction of a candy fort centerpiece surmounted by the figure of General Shaler on horseback, Generals Grant and Lee being also on horseback in the midst of sugary cavalry, artillery, and infantry. The presentation of "an elegant set of gold spurs" made the love feast perfect.

¹⁰ April 30, 1885.

Before the year was out, however, the disclosure of uncomplimentary facts soft-pedaled praise of General Shaler. Rumors of dishonest practice in the transactions of the Armory Board led the Gibbs Committee, of the New York State legislature, to investigate. It found that one Monmouth B. Wilson, superintendent of the Fire Patrol and a close friend of Shaler's, had received large commissions for aiding property owners to sell armory sites to the board. For one site, purchased for \$350,000, he received \$11,000; for another, offered by brokers for \$200,000, but bought for \$208,000, he received \$2,080; for a third, purchased for \$265,000, Wilson got \$3,650. All three owners testified that "they supposed Wilson 'had the inside track because of his influence with Gen. Shaler.'"¹¹ Wilson had collected in this manner a total of \$39,000.

He also took up a mortgage of \$9,000 on property owned by Shaler, who had not paid the interest in three years. First explaining this action as an investment, Wilson, threatened with an indictment for contempt, broke down to admit that he had had an understanding with Shaler to take up the mortgage if successful in promoting a sale of property for the Eighth Regiment armory. For that site the city paid \$35,000 more than the owner received for it. This evidence, plus a Wilson check for \$600 to Shaler, Wilson's commissions, and known friendship for the General, led the Gibbs Committee to declare that Shaler had been party to a fraud. In December, 1885, the mayor preferred charges of malfeasance, the Grand Jury indicted Shaler for bribery, and he was arrested. Said the *Times*:

While an officer of the corporation of the city he became interested in contracts for the purchase of property

¹¹ *New York Times*, November 29, 1885.

for its use; he converted public property to his own use by permitting money paid by the city to be appropriated to his personal benefit; and while in the employment of the City Government he accepted a "gift, promise, or undertaking to make the same," under an agreement or understanding that his "vote, opinion, judgment, or action should be influenced thereby." All these are distinct and specific offenses defined by law and subjecting the offender to criminal proceedings¹²

Within two months proceedings ensued. During the trial, Shaler's strong trio of counsel, headed by Elihu Root, made a better showing than the prosecution. The jury deadlocked at ten to two for conviction. When the second trial ended in another deadlock, four to eight, the district attorney, doubting that he could obtain a verdict, moved to dismiss the charges, and General Shaler was freed of the threat of Sing Sing, where the *Times* said he undoubtedly belonged.

. . . though there was a failure to convict, the evidence against him was such as to leave no moral doubt of his guilt Gen. Shaler . . . still retains the position on the Armory Board, which he is believed to have disgraced by corruption. He is Major-General of the First Division of the National Guard, and he is President of the Board of Health. He ought to give up those positions and retire to privacy and seclusion.¹³

Moral certainty of guilt as a member of the Armory Board, together with an unhealthy record as health commissioner, strengthens the presumption that at Rockerville Shaler had been in collusion with Captain West in bilking the Black Hills Placer Mining Company. On the face of it,

¹² *Ibid.*, December 1, 1885.

¹³ *Ibid.*, April 28, 1886.

the Wilson-Shaler connection looked very much like the West-Shaler. It seems unlikely that the grafting in New York was a newly acquired habit; more likely that it was ingrained. It was discovered only by the inquiries of indignant citizens, of an investigating committee, and of a district attorney, none of whom were present in Dakota, where anybody minded to cook his accounts might do so without fear of even an occasional audit of the company's books. Bierce, at least, had no moral doubts of Shaler's guilt, nor had Marcus Walker.

At the peremptory demand of the governor, Shaler did resign from the national guard, but he clung to his other jobs—as if the damaged honor of an officer and gentleman were of no consequence when he took off his uniform. But the mayor immediately recommended to the governor that Shaler be removed from the Health Department. For nine months the governor failed to act on this recommendation, Shaler meanwhile keeping his job, and the *Times* periodically thrusting in the needle. "Whatever the degree of the Governor's intelligence may be, it would be an insult to it to suppose that he has any doubt in his own mind about the case of Gen. Shaler. If he has looked at the papers before him or if he is acquainted with matters of common notoriety he knows perfectly well that Shaler is unfit to be President of the Board of Health, or indeed to be at large."¹⁴

Finally coming to life, the governor approved the recommendation, and Shaler was ejected. When he was asked by a reporter what he intended to do about it, he replied: "I am a man of peace and you may rest assured that there will be nothing unseemly."¹⁵ Evidently he had reformed since Rockerville days, when his sulks and rages were neither

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, January 21, 1887.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, March 6, 1887.

peaceful nor seemly. Evidently, also, moral certainty of fraud was not, to the General at least, unseemly. Yet despite his words, he bitterly contested his ouster on the technical grounds that *if* he had accepted bribes, he had taken them as a member of the Armory Board, not as health commissioner, and that therefore the mayor's recommendation had no lawful authority. This strategy was again directed by that respectable statesman-to-be, Elihu Root.¹⁶

"It is monstrous," said the *Times*, "that a man should be enabled to retain a municipal office in the face of evidence upon which he can be put out of his command in the militia and very nearly put into the State prison."¹⁷ But Shaler stubbornly carried the fight all the way to the state Supreme Court. When, in 1889, that body handed down a decision "dismissing the writ of certiorari procured to test the legality of the removal by Mayor Grace," the General dropped out of office and out of sight.

He reappeared briefly in the news a few years later after the presidential election of 1892, won by Grover Cleveland. Shaler's Republican sympathies magniloquently allied election-day rain with the disaster of Harrison's defeat. "The heavens were weeping," he said, "for the calamity which befell our country Were it not for our extraordinary and unbounded resources which give the Nation strength to withstand such a severe trial, our whole people might with propriety put on mourning weeds."¹⁸ Yes, the nation had

¹⁶ Such energetic defense of so dubious a character as Shaler may have played a part in inspiring a Bierce epitaph on Elihu Root:

*Stoop to a dirty trick or low misdeed?
What, bend him from his moral skies to it?
No, no, not he! To serve his nature's need
He may upon occasion rise to it.*

¹⁷ June 8, 1886.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, November 19, 1892.

strength to withstand the trials brought on by its Clevelands, its Harrisons, and, incidentally, its Shalers. Viewing other politicians with alarm, he apparently did not think of taking a long hard look at himself as a handicap to good government. The Shalers of this world rarely do look closely at themselves. His theme song, set to an old familiar Republican tune, may assist slightly in the delineation of a character not conspicuous for brilliant cerebration.

In 1893, as a bizarre anticlimax, he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for "distinguished gallantry at the battle of Salem Heights, Va., May 3, 1863," an action subsidiary to the battle of Chancellorsville. The thirty years' hiatus between the battle and the award suggests politicking to wheedle this distinction, but the timing was poor. No doubt General Shaler's military service merited recognition, but at that particular moment, considering his scandalous record in municipal affairs, "honor" was a grotesque word. The morning after the presentation the *New York Times* did not find room for a single line about the event in an extra-large edition of twenty-four pages. Perhaps the omission was an oversight; perhaps the item was not considered part of all the news that's fit to print. After getting his medal, the General lapsed into obscurity. In 1911 he died.

This capsule history may recall miscellaneous Bierce remarks about Shaler's perfidy. The facts reveal a character less admirable than shifty, a mind possessed of enough cunning to keep its owner out of jail, yet not very bright, and a moral fabric more sleazy than firm. On the basis of his New York record, he was a very shoddy specimen. There is no reason to suppose that he was otherwise at Rockerville. If the Biercean habit of labeling men liars and thieves sometimes unjustly affronted innocence, on Shaler he appears to have called the turn some years before the Gibbs Committee

hauled him up. Its findings induce the surmise that the Black Hills Company was doomed from the moment West and Shaler met each other, before the treasurer ever handed over a dollar.

Of others in the company, the hard-working John McGinnis kept on in the brokerage business, which must have flourished, for he eventually sold his seat in the produce exchange for \$50,000. His wife having died in 1898, he married again in 1901 at the age of seventy, and three months after the wedding he, too, died in Woodhaven, Long Island.

About Male, Tillinghast, Colonel Paine, the cantankerous Marcus Walker, and so forth, the record is a blank. Apparently none of them did anything either sufficiently notable or notorious to make the headlines. Cornelius Vanderbilt, not seriously crippled by the demise of the Black Hills Company, got along very well as president of the New York Central Railroad, as a director on the boards of forty other railroads and of a number of charitable institutions, and as a trustee of Columbia University, of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and of the American Museum of Natural History. His French chateau on Fifth Avenue was one of the sights of the town, as was his two-million-dollar mansion, "The Breakers," one of the sights of Newport. He rated front-page publicity for any remarks on any subject, for his frequent trips to Europe, and for his family rows—all of which seemed important in the heyday of the tycoon. When he died in September, 1899, the *Times* obituary, telling at some length the story of his career in business and philanthropy, failed to mention that he had once been president of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company.

9. *Back to the Hills*

IT IS time now to return to Rockerville. Out there in the spring of 1881, the Black Hills Company, revived by a fifty-thousand-dollar mortgage, was supposed to begin operations "under very favorable auspices." But they vanished almost before the frost was out of the ground. For a while the habitual company swirl of change looked like business as usual. In frantic succession Colonel Tozier took charge for a time, then Bierce's father-in-law, Captain Day, and then a Mr. McGillicuddy, of Philadelphia. But at this point such rotation was immaterial, for the most skillful of managers could not have produced gold fast enough to stay the crash. Court judgments, like initial tremors, heralded the quick onslaught of shattering disaster. Case after case had gone in favor of plaintiffs, from verdicts involving five figures in the First District Court down to those for petty sums in the Justice's Court of Rockerville. To satisfy these judgments, the company had no assets except its mortgaged property.

The sheriff of Pennington County moved in. When he had finished a busy summer selling up whatever he could lay his hands on, the Black Hills Company did not own so much as a keg of nails. Everything went on the block: West's property, company land and water rights, miscellaneous

materials like sheet iron, nozzles, steam engine, even office furniture, carpets, blankets, mirrors, stoves, chandeliers—and the core of the whole works, the Sheridan dam and the big flume. Those were bid in by Alonzo Gates and Emanuel Goughnour for \$12,257.79. Another active bidder, in at the death, was Mr. Girdler, who was very busy buying land and assorted materials at bargain prices. “Thus the famous flume,” said the *Rapid City Journal*, “passes out of the possession of the company. What will be done in regard to it in the future cannot be foretold. It is believed by some the company will redeem it.”¹

The *Journal*, always friendly to the company, particularly to Captain West, seemed sad about this denouement. But whoever believed in redemption could be only a fatuous optimist. The chances were not worth the longest of long-shot bets. This company was down and out. On December 30, 1882, in a foreclosure of mortgage sale in the City Exchange salesroom of New York, the company was auctioned off for five dollars to Marcus Walker. At last he had the full control he sought, but all he controlled was only a name. What he did with it thereafter was nothing at all. Perhaps he preserved it for sentimental reasons as a keepsake, like the faded flower in the memory book. The company remained merely a name and nothing more until it was dissolved by proclamation of the governor of New York in 1924. It is difficult to imagine the weird process of dissolving a ghost, or of an emptiness without form or substance. But the name still remains on the roster of corporations alive and dead in the archives of the New York Department of State.

The *Journal* need not have been dubious about the future. Far from damaging Rockerville, the quietus of the Black Hills Company meant a great improvement. The flume

¹ August 6, 1881.

did not rot away unused. Various managements took hold during succeeding years to run it, not for their own mining operations, but solely for leasing water to claim owners. Water being what they had long wanted, nothing need stop them from getting it but agreement on price after a reasonable period of customary haggling. The bosses kept the long structure in good repair, hiring the boy Ben Rush to spot leaks. Every day, carrying a handful of rags to plug holes, he patrolled the eighteen miles on the narrow footplank, skipping around twisting curves, and not at all bothered by the dizzy trestles. Another tested leak-stopper was a daily load of horse manure forked in at the head of the flume.

If management changed every few years and likewise the price of leasing, water did flow, and the miners got it. Hydraulic operations expanded. Forced out of a nozzle under high pressure, a powerful stream cut away great chunks of gulches and washed them down. Wide areas were stripped to bedrock, left clean and bare as a hardwood floor. For almost a decade Rockerville enjoyed, if not a boom, a steady kind of prosperity. Ben Rush hauled tons of freight over the long, hilly, and in winter frigid, road from Rapid City, bringing to the miners, among other things, many a demijohn, which they always waited up for even if he did not get in until well past midnight. If cleanups were not bonanzas causing stampedes, they were good enough to make every prospector imagine himself becoming a millionaire once a week or oftener. Mine shafts pitted the earth, the hydraulic nozzles played their powerful streams, and the town remained comfortably alive until the late 1880's.

Myron Willsie remained in the district, never acquiring much knowledge of mining, yet promoting tin mines with some success, and also dabbling in politics in a minor way. He was said never to have been caught without a bot-

tle, or several bottles, in his buggy. Benney Caulfield was once mentioned as a possible candidate for governor, but his death in 1886 ended the possibility of a political career. Boone May, cramped by the refinements of encroaching civilization, lighted out for Bolivia, taking his six-shooters along. Down there, his trigger finger being as nervous as ever, he shot an army officer in a row over a woman. With police on his trail, Boone took to the hills for a long cooling-off, then went on to Brazil, where he had heard of a fabulous region that yielded both gold and diamonds. But before he could reach it, he succumbed to yellow fever in Rio. Charles Girdler soon disposed, at a neat profit, of property bought at sheriff's sales, and thereafter apparently engaged in no more free-of-charge advising at Rockerville.

Captain West was said to have turned up in Mexico with a comely female companion, and to have lived there in such lavish style that he was looked upon as a man of great wealth. He rolled up an impressive score of debts, which he left behind unpaid when he one day suddenly disappeared. Then he landed in Silver Creek, New Mexico, without other baggage than his overalls, blue shirt, and slouch hat: broke, ill, and minus the beautiful female. But by the end of 1882, according to the *New York Times*, "it is reported that now, having recovered his health and having speedily won great popularity in the vicinity of Silver Creek, he has been advanced capital and is about to engage in mining operations of great magnitude near that place and put up works which are to rival the famous Desmet works, in the neighborhood of Deadwood City, which were planned and erected by him."² That scenario was an old stand-by that had been used before. If the report was true, Silver Creek might pay for a repeat performance, with variations, of the Rocker-

² December 31, 1882.

ville farce. After much practice, Captain West must have been capable of playing his role with flawless effrontery. Posing as the designer of the De Smet works was merely a minor sample of the smooth technique by which he induced others to entrust him with large sums. Nothing short of extinction would stop that man.

Sometime in the late eighties, the flume management being either short of money or careless or both, the wooden structure began to fall apart. Even stout inch and a half planks did rot, and unstopped leaks drained away too much water. Bierce had pointed out that since the flume was at times empty or only partially filled, deterioration could be rapid. Once begun, disintegration accelerated. And as the flume rotted, the town likewise decayed. As Bierce and others had said, only water kept this camp alive. But when the flow became a trickle, inhabitants drifted away. By 1890, the once promising community had so shrunk that it was not even listed in the United States Census. Main Street was deserted, and on the hills were rows of desolate houses with gaping windows and sagging doors. These gradually disappeared, demolished by the few remaining citizens, who also helped themselves to long planks from the flume. By the turn of the century, Rockerville Gulch was almost as empty and as peaceful as it had been before the discovery of Captain Jack.



Epilogue

UP AND DOWN the deep cleft of Deadwood Gulch the town strings out along its axis, Main Street. Within a block or two, north and south, houses march up the steep slopes. With the same chain stores and filling stations as other towns, the same glossy cars congesting narrow streets, Deadwood retains few visible reminders of its turbulent beginnings. Loud bangs are merely back-firing trucks, not six-shooters fired with the intent to kill or to celebrate. Yet townsmen are so conscious of their past that the hard outlines of the early scene soften in a haze of romance. Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok are patron saints. Historic spots are the graves of both and the site of Number Ten Saloon, where Wild Bill was foully assassinated by Jack McCall.

In expanding Rapid City, the pace is brisk on wide streets. Like those of Deadwood, they say nothing now of long trains of bull teams plodding through, of the bellowing and the cussing and the dust. The broad-brimmed Stetson, tight Levis, and high-heeled riding boots are a popular costume, and not a horse in sight. The Indian wears the white man's attire, even though not completely reconstructed to the white man's ways. Some venerable tribal patriarchs cling to moccasins and long, braided hair, and they toe in when

they walk, like their savage forefathers on trail. Almost nobody in Rapid City remembers ever hearing about Ambrose Bierce and the Black Hills Placer Mining Company, yet many inhabitants of middle age and older nostalgically remember the long Rockerville flume.

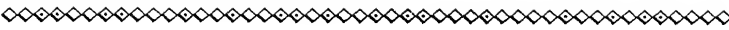
The road to Rockerville, less straight up and down than it was seventy years ago, swings over the vast rolling country in swooping curves and gentle grades. In Rockerville Gulch the cottonwoods are aged and stately, and the pines cluster on the slopes. Where once the Delmonico Hotel, Exchange Billiard Hall, Heuniche's brewery, saloons, and stores lined Main Street now stand one combined store and filling station, one house, several red barns, and the remnant of an old log building. The slopes, once filled with houses, are now empty, not a trace of a house remaining. Rockerville is the ghost of a ghost town. Nothing there bespeaks now the fitful fever of all that turmoil in 1880, of the contentious General Shaler and Captain West, of the troublesome Marcus Walker, and of the frustrated Ambrose Bierce. The calm would be perfect were it not continually broken by a steady procession of cars and trucks whizzing through on Highway 16. Drivers unable to lift a foot from the accelerator seem unaware that they are momentarily in the middle of what was once a bustling mining camp.

In gulches all around remain abortive mine shafts, ditches dug for sluicing, wide depressions cut by the hydraulic nozzle, and huge boulders lifted out of the water by hand and piled up like ramparts. All of that is silent testimony to an unbelievable number of foot pounds of manual labor. Nature has long since healed the raw wounds of the gashed earth. On broad stretches where the soil was stripped off down to bedrock, she has confounded the conservationists by producing grass thicker and more lush than elsewhere,

jack pines faster-growing and more sturdy. Of the great flume, no trace remains except the grade, still definable through covering vegetation. Planks, ties, braces, trestles, all long ago rotted away or were carried away. The optimistic guess of the Black Hills Company's report, and of Bierce himself, that fluming operations were an enterprise of a century, missed accuracy by about ninety years. Yet if the estimate of that long ago "expert" was correct—two billion dollars in the Rockerville basin, he said—a great deal of gold must still lie buried in those gulches. Possibly, in the words of the *Rapid City Journal* of 1878, enterprising persons should "take hold of the matter."

A roadside marker announces, with probable exaggeration, that Rockerville was once a hardy town of 2,500 people. Another marker calls attention to a stone fireplace, all that remains of the cabin of the father of Ben Rush, the place where Ben himself spent his first night in the Hills in the early eighties. He is still there, on a thousand acres not far from Rockerville, a sagacious and hospitable gentleman full of fascinating anecdotes, all informative, some ribald and profane.

One familiar with the history of the Black Hills Placer Mining Company may set up in his imagination one more marker, which might say: Here for a few devilish months in 1880 a good man worked very hard at a thankless job. He was industrious, loyal, and honest, and he was defeated. But in defeat he was a better man than the victors, a better man than he himself was at almost any other time in his life. Such behavior is worthy of remembrance. His name was Bierce—Major A. G. Bierce, General Agent.



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